

POOR MISS FINCH

BY THE AUTHOR OF
"THE WOMAN IN WHITE"



ESHER

POOR MISS FINCH.

A Novel.

BY

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"THE WOMAN IN WHITE," "NO NAME," "MAN AND WIFE,"
ETC., ETC.

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POOR MISS FINCH.

CHAPTER THE FIRST.

NUGENT PUZZLES MADAME PRATOLUNGO.

NUGENT WAS far from sharing Lucilla's opinion of Nugent Dubourg. His enormous self-confidence was, to my mind, too amusing to be in the least offensive. I liked the spirit and gaiety of the young fellow. He came much nearer than his brother did to my ideal of the dash and resolution which ought to distinguish a man on the right side of thirty. So far as my experience of them went, Nugent was (in the popular English phrase) good company—and Oscar was not. My nation-

ality leads me to attach great importance to social qualities. The higher virtues of a man only show themselves occasionally on compulsion. His social qualities come familiarly in contact with us every day of our lives. I like to be cheerful I am all for the social qualities.

There was one little obstacle in those early days, which set itself up between my sympathies and Nugent.

I was thoroughly at a loss to understand the impression which Lucilla had produced on him.

The same constraint which had, in such a marked manner, subdued him at his first interview with her, still fettered him in the time when they became better acquainted with one another. He was never in high spirits in her presence. Mr. Finch could talk him down without difficulty, if Mr. Finch's daughter happened to be by. Even when he was vapouring about himself, and telling us of the wonderful things he meant to do in Painting, Lucilla's appearance was enough to check him, if she happened to come into the room. On the first day when he showed me his

American sketches (I define them, if you ask my private opinion, as false pretences of Art, by a dashing amateur)—on that day, he was in full flow ; marching up and down the room, smacking his forehead, and announcing himself quite gravely as “the coming man” in landscape painting. “My mission, Madame Pratolungo, is to reconcile Humanity and Nature. I propose to show (on an immense scale) how Nature (in her grandest aspects) can adapt herself to the spiritual wants of mankind. In your joy or your sorrow, Nature has subtle sympathies with you, if you only know where to look for them. My pictures—no ! my poems in colour—will show you. Multiply my works, as they certainly will be multiplied, by means of prints—and what does Art become in my hands ? A Priesthood ! In what aspect do I present myself to the public ? As a mere landscape painter ? No ! As Grand Consoler !” In the midst of this rhapsody (how wonderfully he resembled Oscar in *his* bursts of excitement while he was talking !)—in the full torrent of his predictions of his own coming greatness, Lucilla

quietly entered the room. The “Grand Consoler” shut up his portfolio ; dropped Painting on the spot ; asked for Music ; and sat down, a model of conventional propriety, in a corner of the room. I inquired afterwards, why he had checked himself when she came in. “Did I ?” he said. “I don’t know why.” The thing was really inexplicable. He honestly admired her—one had only to notice him when he was looking at her to see it. He had not the faintest suspicion of her dislike for him—she carefully concealed it for Oscar’s sake. He felt genuine sympathy for her in her affliction—his mad idea that her sight might yet be restored, was the natural offspring of a true feeling for her. He was not unfavourable to his brother’s marriage—on the contrary, he ruffled the rector’s dignity (he was always giving offence to Mr. Finch) by suggesting that the marriage might be hastened. I heard him say the words myself :—“The church is close by. Why can’t you put on your surplice and make Oscar happy to-morrow, after breakfast ?” More even than this, he showed the most vivid

interest—like a woman's interest rather than a man's—in learning how the love-affair between Oscar and Lucilla had begun. I referred him, so far as Oscar was concerned, to his brother as the fountain-head of information. He did not decline to consult his brother. He did not own to me that he felt any difficulty in doing so. He simply dropped Oscar in silence; and asked about Lucilla. How had it begun on her side? I reminded him of his brother's romantic position at Dimchurch, and told him to judge for himself of the effect it would produce on the excitable imagination of a young girl. He declined to judge for himself; he persisted in appealing to me. When I told the little love-story of the two young people, one event in it appeared to make a very strong impression on him. The effect produced on Lucilla (when she first heard it) by the sound of his brother's voice, dwelt strangely on his mind. He failed to understand it; he ridiculed it; he declined to believe it. I was obliged to remind him that Lucilla was blind, and that love which, in other cases, first finds its way to the

heart through the eyes, could only, in her case, first find its way through the ears. My explanation, thus offered, had its effect : it set him thinking. “ The sound of his voice !” he said to himself, still turning the problem over and over in his mind. “ People say my voice is exactly like Oscar’s,” he added, suddenly addressing himself to me. “ Do you think so too ?” I answered that there could be no doubt of it. He got up from his chair, with a quick little shudder, like a man who feels a chill—and changed the subject. On the next occasion when he and Lucilla met—so far from being more familiar with her, he was more constrained than ever. As it had begun between these two, so it seemed likely to continue to the end. In my society, he was always at his ease. In Lucilla’s society, never !

What was the obvious conclusion which a person with my experience ought to have drawn from all this ?

I know well enough what it was, now. On my oath as an honest woman, I failed to see it at the time. We are not always (suffer me to remind you) consistent with ourselves.

The cleverest people commit occasional lapses into stupidity—just as the stupid people light up with gleams of intelligence at certain times. You may have shown your usual good sense in conducting your affairs on Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday in the week. But it doesn't at all follow from this, that you may not make a fool of yourself on Thursday. Account for it as you may—for a much longer time than it suits my self-esteem to reckon up, I suspected nothing and discovered nothing. I noted his behaviour in Lucilla's presence as odd behaviour and unaccountable behaviour—and that was all.

During the first fortnight just mentioned, the London doctor came to see Oscar.

He left again, perfectly satisfied with the results of his treatment. The dreadful epileptic malady would torture the patient and shock the friends about him no more: the marriage might safely be celebrated at the time agreed on. Oscar was cured.

The doctor's visit—reviving our interest in observing the effect of the medicine—also

revived the subject of Oscar's false position towards Lucilla. Nugent and I held a debate about it between ourselves. I opened the interview by suggesting that we should unite our forces to persuade his brother into taking the frank and manly course. Nugent neither said Yes nor No to that proposal at the outset. He, who made up his mind at a moment's notice about everything else, took time to decide on this one occasion.

“There is something that I want to know first,” he said. “I want to understand this curious antipathy of Lucilla's which my brother regards with so much alarm. Can you explain it?”

“Has Oscar attempted to explain it?” I inquired on my side.

“He mentioned it in one of his letters to me; and he tried to explain it, when I asked (on my arrival at Browndown) if Lucilla had discovered the change in his complexion. But he failed entirely to meet my difficulty in understanding the case.”

“What is your difficulty?”

“This. So far as I can see, she fails to

discover intuitively the presence of dark people in a room, or of dark colours in the ornaments of a room. It is only when *she is told* that such persons or such things are present that her prejudice declares itself. In what state of mind does such a strange feeling as this take its rise? It seems impossible that she can have any conscious associations with colours, pleasant or painful—if it is true that she was blind at a year old. How do you account for it? Can there be such a thing as a purely instinctive antipathy; remaining passive until external influences rouse it; and resting on no sort of practical experience whatever?"

"I think there may be," I replied. "Why, when I was a child just able to walk, did I shrink away from the first dog I saw who barked at me? I could not have known, at that age, either by experience or teaching, that a dog's bark is sometimes the prelude to a dog's bite. My terror, on that occasion, was purely instinctive surely?"

"Ingeniously put," he said. "But I am not satisfied yet."

“ You must also remember,” I continued, “ that she has a positively painful association with dark colours, on certain occasions. They sometimes produce a disagreeable impression on her nerves, through her sense of touch. She discovered, in that way, that I had a dark gown on, on the day when I first saw her.”

“ And yet, she touches my brother’s face, and fails to discover any alteration in it.”

I met that objection also—to my own satisfaction, though not to his.

“ I am far from sure that she might not have made the discovery,” I said, “ if she had touched him for the first time, since the discolouration of his face. But she examines him now with a settled impression in her mind, derived from previous experience of what she has felt in touching his skin. Allow for the modifying influence of that impression on her sense of touch—and remember at the same time, that it is the colour and not the texture of the skin that is changed—and his escape from discovery becomes, to my mind, intelligible.”

He shook his head; he owned he could not dispute my view. But he was not content for all that.

“Have you made any inquiries,” he asked, “about the period of her infancy before she was blind? She may be still feeling, indirectly and unconsciously, the effect of some shock to her nervous system in the time when she could see.”

“I have never thought of making inquiries.”

“Is there anybody within our reach, who was familiarly associated with her, in the first year of her life? It is hardly likely, I am afraid, at this distance of time?”

“There is a person now in the house,” I said. “Her old nurse is still living.”

“Send for her directly.”

Zillah appeared. After first explaining what he wanted with her, Nugent went straight to the inquiry which he had in view.

“Was your young lady ever frightened when she was a baby by any dark person, or any dark thing, suddenly appearing before her?”

“Never, sir! I took good care to let nothing come near her that could frighten her—so long, poor little thing, as she could see.”

“Are you quite sure you can depend on your memory?”

“Quite sure, sir—when it’s a long time ago.”

Zillah was dismissed. Nugent—thus far, unusually grave, and unusually anxious—turned to me with an air of relief.

“When you proposed to me to join you in forcing Oscar to speak out,” he said, “I was not quite easy in my mind about the consequences. After what I have just heard, my fear is removed.”

“What fear?” I asked.

“The fear of Oscar’s confession producing an estrangement between them which might delay the marriage. I am against all delays. I am especially anxious that Oscar’s marriage should not be put off. When we began our conversation, I own to you I was of Oscar’s opinion that he would do wisely to let marriage make him sure of his position in her affections, before he risked the disclosure.

Now—after what the nurse has told us—I see no risk worth considering."

"In short," I said, "you agree with me?"

"I agree with you—though I *am* the most opinionated man living. The chances now seem to me to be all in Oscar's favour. Lucilla's antipathy is not what I feared it was—an antipathy firmly rooted in a constitutional malady. It is nothing more serious," said Nugent, deciding the question, at once and for ever, with the air of a man profoundly versed in physiology—"it is nothing more serious than a fanciful growth, a morbid accident, of her blindness. She may live to get over it—she would, I believe, certainly get over it, if she could see. In two words, after what I have found out this morning, I say as you say—Oscar is making a mountain out of a molehill. He ought to have put himself right with Lucilla long since. I have unbounded influence over him. It shall back your influence. Oscar shall make a clean breast of it, before the week is out."

We shook hands on that bargain. As I looked at him—bright and dashing and reso-

lute ; Oscar, as I had always wished Oscar to be—I own to my shame I privately regretted that we had not met Nugent in the twilight, on that evening walk of ours which had opened to Lucilla the gates of a new life.

Having said to each other all that we had to say—our two lovers being away together, at the time, for a walk on the hills—we separated, as I then supposed, for the rest of the day. Nugent went to the inn, to look at a stable which he proposed converting into a studio no room at Browndown being half large enough, for the first prodigious picture with which the “Grand Consoler” in Art proposed to astonish the world. As for me, having nothing particular to do, I went out to see if I could meet Oscar and Lucilla on their return from their walk.

Failing to find them, I strolled back by way of Browndown. Nugent was sitting alone on the low wall in front of the house, smoking a cigar. He rose and came to meet me, with his finger placed mysteriously on his lips.

“ You mustn’t come in,” he said ; “ and you mustn’t speak loud enough to be heard.” He

pointed round the corner of the house to the little room at the side, already familiar to you in these pages. "Oscar and Lucilla are shut up together there. And Oscar is making his confession to her at this moment!"

I lifted my hands and eyes in astonishment. Nugent went on.

"I see you want to know how it has all come about. You shall know.—While I was looking at the stable (it isn't half big enough for a studio for Me!), Oscar's servant brought me a little pencil note, entreating me, in Oscar's name, to go to him directly at Browndown. I found him waiting out here, dreadfully agitated. He cautioned me (just as I have cautioned you) not to speak loud. For the same reason too. Lucilla was in the house ——"

"I thought they had gone out for a walk," I interposed.

"They did go out for a walk. But Lucilla complained of fatigue; and Oscar brought her back to Browndown to rest. Well! I inquired what was the matter. The answer informed me that the secret of Oscar's complexion had

forced its way out for the second time, in Lucilla's hearing."

"Jicks again!" I exclaimed.

"No—not Jicks. Oscar's own man-servant, this time."

"How did it happen?"

"It happened through one of the boys in the village. Oscar and Lucilla found the little imp howling outside the house. They asked what was the matter. The imp told them that the servant at Browndown had beaten him. Lucilla was indignant. She insisted on having the thing inquired into. Oscar left her in the drawing-room (unluckily, as it turned out, without shutting the door); called the man up into the passage, and asked what he meant by ill-using the boy. The man answered, 'I boxed his ears, sir, as an example to the rest of them.' 'What did he do?' 'Rapped at the door, sir, with a stick (he is not the first who has done it when you are out); and asked if Blue Face was at home.' Lucilla heard every word of it, through the open door. Need I tell you what happened next?"

It was quite needless to relate that part of the story. I remembered too well what had happened on the former occasion, in the garden. I saw too plainly that Lucilla must have connected the two occurrences in her mind, and must have had her ready suspicion roused to serious action, as the necessary result.

“I understand,” I said. “Of course, she insisted on an explanation. Of course, Oscar compromised himself by a clumsy excuse, and wanted you to help him. What did you do?”

“What I told you I should do this morning. He had counted confidently on my taking his side—it was pitiable to see him, poor fellow! Still, for his own sake, I refused to yield. I left him the choice of giving her the true explanation himself, or of leaving me to do it. There wasn’t a moment to lose; she was in no humour to be trifled with, I can tell you! Oscar behaved very well about it—he always behaves well when I drive him into a corner! In one word, he was man enough to feel that he was the right person to make a clean breast of it—not I. I gave the poor old boy a hug to encourage him, pushed him into the room,

shut the door on him, and came out here. He ought to have done it by this time. He *has* done it! Here he comes!"

Oscar ran out, bareheaded, from the house. There were signs of disturbance in him, as he approached us, which warned me that something had gone wrong, before he opened his lips.

Nugent spoke first.

"What's amiss now?" he asked. "Have you told her the truth?"

"I have tried to tell her the truth."

"Tried? What do you mean?"

Oscar put his arm round his brother's neck, and laid his head on his brother's shoulder, without answering one word.

I put a question to him on my side.

"Did Lucilla refuse to listen to you?" I asked.

"No."

"Has she said anything or done anything——?"

He lifted his head from his brother's shoulder, and stopped me before I could finish the sentence.

“ You need feel no anxiety about Lucilla. Lucilla’s curiosity is satisfied.”

Nugent and I gazed at one another, in complete bewilderment. Lucilla had heard it all; Lucilla’s curiosity was satisfied. He had that incredibly happy result to communicate to us—and he announced it with a look of humiliation, in a tone of despair! Nugent’s patience gave way.

“ Let us have an end of this mystification,” he said, putting Oscar back from him, sharply, at arm’s length. “ I want a plain answer to a plain question. She knows that the boy knocked at the door, and asked if Blue Face was at home. Does she know what the boy’s impudence meant? Yes? or No?”

“ Yes.”

“ Does she know that it is you who are Blue Face?”

“ No.”

“ No!!! Who else does she think it is?”

As he asked the question, Lucilla appeared at the door of the house. She moved her blind face inquiringly first one way, then the

other. "Oscar!" she called out, "why have you left me alone? where are you?"

Oscar turned, trembling, to his brother.

"For God's sake forgive me, Nugent!" he said. "She thinks it's You."





CHAPTER THE SECOND.

HE PROVES EQUAL TO THE OCCASION.

AT that astounding confession, abruptly revealed in those plain words, even resolute Nugent lost all power of self-control. He burst out with a cry which reached Lucilla's ears. She instantly turned towards us, and instantly assumed that the cry had come from Oscar's lips.

“ Ah ! there you are ! ” she exclaimed. “ Oscar ! Oscar ! what *is* the matter with you to-day ? ”

Oscar was incapable of answering her. He had cast one glance of entreaty at his brother as Lucilla came nearer to us. The mute reproach which had answered him, in Nugent's

eyes, had broken down his last reserves of endurance. He was crying silently—crying like a woman—on Nugent's breast.

It was necessary that somebody should break the silence. I spoke first.

“Nothing is the matter, my dear,” I said, advancing to meet Lucilla. “We were passing the house, and Oscar ran out to stop us and bring us in.”

My excuses roused a new alarm in her.

“Us?” she repeated. “Who is with you?”

“Nugent is with me.”

The result of the deplorable misunderstanding which had taken place, instantly declared itself. She turned deadly pale under the horror of feeling that she was in the presence of the man with the blue face.

“Take me near enough to speak to him, but not to touch him,” she whispered. “I have heard what he is like. (Oh, if you saw him, as I see him, *in the dark!*) I must control myself. I must speak to Oscar's brother, for Oscar's sake.”

She seized my arm and held me close to her. What ought I to have said? What

ought I to have done ? I neither knew what to say, or what to do. I looked from Lucilla to the twin-brothers. There was Oscar the Weak, overwhelmed by the humiliating position in which he had placed himself towards the woman whom he was to marry, towards the brother whom he loved ! And there was Nugent the Strong, master of himself ; with his arm round his brother, with his head erect, with his hand signing to me to keep silence. He was right. I had only to look back at Lucilla's face to see that the delicate and perilous work of undeceiving her was not work to be done at a moment's notice, on the spot.

" You are not yourself to-day," I said to her. " Let us go home."

" No !" she answered. " I must accustom myself to speak to him. I will begin to-day. Take me to him—but don't let him touch me !"

Nugent disengaged himself from Oscar—whose unfitness to help us through our difficulties was too manifest to be mistaken—as he saw us approaching. He pointed to the low wall in front of the house, and motioned to his brother to wait there out of the way

before Lucilla could speak to him again. The wisdom of this proceeding was not long in asserting itself. Lucilla asked for Oscar the moment after he had left us. Nugent answered that Oscar had gone back to the house to get his hat.

The sound of Nugent's voice helped her to calculate her distance from him without assistance from me. Still holding my arm, she stopped and spoke to him.

“Nugent,” she said, “I have made Oscar tell me—what he ought to have told me long since.” (She paused between each sentence; painfully controlling herself, painfully catching her breath.) “He has discovered a foolish antipathy of mine. I don't know how; I tried to keep it a secret from him. I need not tell you what it is.”

She made a longer pause at those words, holding me closer and closer to her; struggling more and more painfully against the irresistible nervous loathing that had got possession of her. He listened, on his side, with the constraint which always fell upon him in her presence more marked than ever.

His eyes were on the ground. He seemed reluctant even to look at her.

“I think I understand,” she went on, “why Oscar was unwilling to tell me——” she stopped, at a loss how to express herself without running the risk of hurting his feelings——“to tell me,” she resumed, “what it is in you which is not like other people. He was afraid my stupid weakness might prejudice me against you. I wish to say that I won’t let it do that. I never was more ashamed of it than now. I, too, have my misfortune. I ought to sympathise with you, instead of——”

Her voice had been growing fainter and fainter as she proceeded. She leaned against me heavily. One glance at her told me that if I let it go on any longer she would fall into a swoon. “Tell your brother that we have gone back to the rectory,” I said to Nugent. He looked up at Lucilla for the first time.

“You are right,” he answered. “Take her home.” He repeated the sign by which he had already hinted to me to be silent—

and joined Oscar at the wall in front of the house.

“Has he gone?” she asked.

“He has gone.”

The moisture stood thick on her forehead. I passed my handkerchief over her face, and turned her towards the wind.

“Are you better now?”

“Yes.”

“Can you walk home?”

“Easily.”

I put her arm in mine. After advancing with me a few steps, she suddenly stopped—with a blind apprehension, as it seemed, of something in front of her. She lifted her little walking cane, and moved it slowly backwards and forwards in the empty air, with the action of some one who is clearing away an encumbrance to a free advance—say the action of a person walking in a thick wood, and pushing aside the lower twigs and branches that intercept the way.

“What are you about?” I asked.

“Clearing the air,” she answered. “The air is full of him. I am in a forest of hover-

ing figures, with faces of black-blue. Give me your arm. Come through!"

"Lucilla!"

"Don't be angry with me. I am coming to my senses again. Nobody knows what folly, what madness it is, better than I do. I have a will of my own suffer as I may, I promise to break myself of it this time. I can't, and won't, let Oscar's brother see that he is an object of horror to me." She stopped once more, and gave me a little propitiatory kiss. "Blame my blindness, dear, don't blame *me*. If I could only see——! Ah, how can I make you understand me, you who don't live in the dark?" She went on a few paces, silent and thoughtful—and then spoke again. "You won't laugh at me, if I say something?"

"You know I won't."

"Suppose yourself to be in bed at night."

"Yes?"

"I have heard people say that they have sometimes woke in the middle of the night, on a sudden, without any noise to disturb them. And they have fancied (without any-

thing particular to justify it) that there was something, or somebody, in the dark room. Has that ever happened to you?"

"Certainly, my love.—It has happened to most people to fancy what you say, when their nerves are a little out of order."

"Very well. There is *my* fancy, and there are *my* nerves. When it happened to you, what did you do?"

"I struck a light, and satisfied myself that I was wrong."

"Suppose yourself without candle or matches, in a night without end, left alone with your fancy in the dark. There you have Me! It would not be easy, would it, to satisfy yourself, if you were in that helpless condition? You might suffer under it—very unreasonably—and yet very keenly for all that." She lifted her little cane, with a sad smile. "You might be almost as great a fool as poor Lucilla, and clear the air before you with this!"

The charm of her voice and her manner, added to the touching simplicity, the pathetic truth of those words. She made me realise,

as I had never realised before, what it is to have, at one and the same time, the blessing of imagination, and the curse of blindness. For a moment, I was absorbed in my admiration and my love for her. For a moment, I forgot the terrible position in which we were all placed. She unconsciously recalled it to me when she spoke next.

“Perhaps, I was wrong to force the truth out of Oscar?” she said, putting her arm again in mine, and walking on. “I might have reconciled myself to his brother, if I had never known what his brother was like. And yet I felt there was something strange in him, without being told, and without knowing what it was. There must have been a reason in me for the dislike that I felt for him from the first.”

Those words appeared to me to indicate the state of mind which had led to Lucilla’s deplorable mistake. I cautiously put some questions to her to test the correctness of my own idea.

“You spoke just now of forcing the truth out of Oscar,” I said. “What made you

suspect that he was concealing the truth from you?"

"He was so strangely embarrassed and confused," she answered. "Anybody in my place would have suspected him of concealing the truth."

So far the answer was conclusive.

"And how came you to find out what the truth really was?" I asked next.

"I guessed at it," she replied, "from something he said in referring to his brother. You know that I took a fanciful dislike to Nugent Dubourg before he came to Dimchurch?"

"Yes."

"And you remember that my prejudice against him was confirmed, on the first day when I passed my hand over his face to compare it with his brother's?"

"I remember."

"Well—while Oscar was rambling and contradicting himself—he said something (a mere trifle) which suggested to me that the person with the blue face must be his brother. There was the explanation that I had sought

for in vain—the explanation of my persistent dislike to Nugent! That horrid dark face of his must have produced some influence on me when I first touched it, like the influence which your horrid purple dress produced on me, when I first touched *that*. Don't you see?"

I saw but too plainly. Oscar had been indebted for his escape from discovery entirely to Lucilla's misinterpretation of his language. And Lucilla's misinterpretation now stood revealed as the natural product of her anxiety to account for her prejudice against Nugent Dubourg. Although the mischief had been done—still, for the quieting of my own conscience, I made an attempt to shake her faith in the false conclusion at which she had arrived.

"There is one thing I don't see yet," I said. "I don't understand Oscar's embarrassment in speaking to you. As you interpret him, what had he to be afraid of?"

She smiled satirically.

"What has become of your memory, my dear?" she asked. "What were *you* afraid

of? You certainly never said a word to me of this poor man's deformity. You felt yourself, I suppose, (just as Oscar felt himself), placed between a choice of difficulties. On one side, my dislike of dark colours and dark people warned Oscar to hold his tongue. On the other, my hatred of having advantage taken of my blindness to keep things secret from me, pressed him to speak out. Isn't that enough—with his shy disposition, poor fellow—to account for his being embarrassed? Besides," she added, speaking more seriously, "Perhaps he saw in my manner towards him that he had disappointed and pained me."

"How?" I asked.

"Don't you remember his once acknowledging in the garden that he had painted his face, in the character of Blue-beard to amuse the children? It was not delicate, it was not affectionate—it was not like *him*—to shew such insensibility as that to his brother's shocking disfigurement. He ought to have remembered it, he ought to have respected it. There! we will say no more. We will go

indoors and open the piano and try to forget!"

Even Oscar's clumsy excuse in the garden—instead of confirming her suspicion—had lent itself to strengthen the foregone conclusion rooted in her mind! At that critical moment—before I had consulted with the twin-brothers as to what was to be done next—it was impossible to say more. I felt seriously alarmed when I thought of the future. When she was told—as told she must be—of the dreadful delusion into which she had fallen, what would be the result to Oscar? what would be the effect on herself? I own I shrank from pursuing the inquiry.

When we reached the turn in the valley, I looked back at Browndown for the last time. The twin-brothers were still in the place at which we had left them. Though the faces were indistinguishable, I could still see the figures plainly—Oscar sitting crouched up on the wall; Nugent erect at his side, with one hand laid on his shoulder. Even at that distance, the types of the two characters were expressed in the attitudes of the two men.

As we entered the new winding of the valley which shut them out from view, I felt (so easy is it to comfort a woman!) that the commanding position of Nugent had produced its encouraging impression on my mind. "He will find a way out of it," I said to myself. "Nugent will help us through!"





CHAPTER THE THIRD.

HE FINDS A WAY OUT OF IT.

WE sat down at the piano, as Lucilla had proposed. She wished me to play first, and to play alone. I was teaching her, at the time, one of the *Sonatas* of Mozart; and I now tried to go on with the lesson. Never before, or since, have I played so badly, as on that day! The divine serenity and completeness by which Mozart's music is, to my mind, raised above all other music that ever was written, can only be worthily interpreted by a player whose whole mind is given undividedly to the work. Devoured as I then was by my own anxieties, I might profane those heavenly melodies—I could not play them.

Lucilla accepted my excuses, and took my place.

Half an hour passed, without news from Browndown.

Calculated by reference to itself, half an hour is no doubt a short space of time.. Calculated by reference to your own suspense, while your own interests are at stake, half an hour is an eternity. Every minute that passed, leaving Lucilla still undisturbed in her delusion, was a minute that pricked me in the conscience. The longer we left her in ignorance, the more painful to all of us the hard duty of enlightening her would become. I began to get restless. Lucilla, on her side, began to complain of fatigue. After the agitation that she had gone through, the inevitable reaction had come. I recommended her to go to her room and rest. She took my advice. In the state of my mind at that time, it was an inexpressible relief to me to be left by myself.

After pacing backwards and forwards for some little time in the sitting-room, and trying vainly to see my way through the diffi-

culties that now beset us, I made up my mind to wait no longer for the news that never came. The brothers were still at Browndown. To Browndown I determined to return.

I peeped quietly into Lucilla's room. She was asleep. After a word to Zillah, recommending her young mistress to her care, I slipped out. As I crossed the lawn, I heard the garden-gate opened. In a minute more, the man of all others whom I most wanted to see, presented himself before me, in the person of Nugent Dubourg. He had borrowed Oscar's key, and had set off alone for the rectory to tell me what had passed between his brother and himself.

“This is the first stroke of luck that has fallen to me to-day,” he said. “I was wondering how I should contrive to speak to you privately. And here you are—accessible and alone. Where is Lucilla? Can we depend on having the garden to ourselves?”

I satisfied him on both those points. He looked sadly pale and worn. Before he opened his lips, I saw that he too had had his

mind disturbed, and his patience tried, since I had left him. There was a summer-house at the end of the garden with a view over the breezy solitude of the Downs. Here we established ourselves ; and here, in my head-long way, I opened the interview with the one formidable question :—“Who is to tell her of the mistake she has made ?”

“ Nobody is to tell her.”

That answer staggered me at the outset. I looked at Nugent in silent astonishment.

“ There is nothing to be surprised at,” he said. “ Let me put my point of view before you in two words. I have had a serious talk with Oscar——”

Women are proverbially bad listeners—and I am no better than the rest of them. I interrupted him, before he could get any farther.

“ I suppose Oscar has told you how the mistake happened ?” I said.

“ He has no idea how it happened. He owns—when he found himself face to face with her—that his presence of mind completely failed him : he didn’t himself know

what he was saying at the time. *He* lost his head ; and *she* lost her patience. Think of his nervous confusion in collision with her nervous irritability—and the result explains itself : nothing *could* come of it but misapprehension and mistake. I turned the thing over in my mind, after you had left us ; and the one course to take that *I* could see was to accept the position patiently, and to make the best instead of the worst of it. Having reached this conclusion, I settled the matter (as I settle most other difficulties)—by cutting the Gordian knot. I said to Oscar, ‘Would it be a relief to your mind to leave her present impression undisturbed until you are married ?’ You know him—I needn’t tell you what his answer was. ‘Very well,’ I said. ‘Dry your eyes, and compose yourself. I have begun as Blue Face. As Blue Face I will go on till further notice.’ I spare you the description of Oscar’s gratitude. I proposed ; and he accepted. There is the way out of the difficulty as I see it.”

“Your way out of the difficulty is an unworthy way, and a false way,” I answered.

“ I protest against taking that cruel advantage of Lucilla’s blindness. I refuse to have anything to do with it.”

He opened his case, and took out a cigar.

“ Do as you please,” he said. “ You saw the pitiable state she was in, when she forced herself to speak to me. You saw how her disgust and horror overpowered her at the end. Transfer that disgust and horror to Oscar (with indignation and contempt added in *his* case); expose him to the result of rousing those feelings in her, before he is fortified by a husband’s influence over her mind, and a husband’s place in her affections—if you dare. I love the poor fellow ; and *I* daren’t. May I smoke ?”

I gave him his permission to smoke by a gesture. Before I said anything more to this inscrutable gentleman, I felt the necessity of understanding him—if I could.

There was no difficulty in accounting for his readiness to sacrifice himself in the interests of Oscar’s tranquillity. He never did things by halves—he liked dashing at diffi-

culties which would have made other men pause. The same zeal in his brother's service which had saved Oscar's life at the Trial, might well be the zeal that animated him now. The perplexity that I felt was not roused in me by the course that he had taken—but by the language in which he justified himself, and, more still, by his behaviour to me while he was speaking. The well-bred brilliant young fellow of my previous experience, had now turned as dogged and as ungracious as a man could be. He waited to hear what I had to say to him next, with a hard defiance and desperation of manner entirely uncalled for by the circumstances, and entirely out of harmony with his character, so far as I had observed it. That there was something lurking under the surface, some inner motive at work in him which he was concealing from his brother and concealing from me, was as plainly visible as the sunshine and shade on the view that I was looking at from the summer-house. But what that something was, or what that inner motive might be, it baffled my utmost sagacity to

guess. Not the faintest idea of the terrible secret that he was hiding from me, crossed my mind. Innocent of all suspicion of the truth, there I sat opposite to him, the unconscious witness of that unhappy man's final struggle to be true to the brother whom he loved, and to master the devouring passion that consumed him. So long as Lucilla falsely believed him to be disfigured by the drug, so long the commonest consideration for her tranquillity would, in the estimation of others, excuse and explain his keeping out of her presence. In that separation, lay his last chance of raising an insurmountable barrier between Lucilla and himself. He had already tried uselessly to place another obstacle in the way—he had vainly attempted to hasten the marriage which would have made Lucilla sacred to him as his brother's wife. That effort having failed, there was but one honourable alternative left to him—to keep out of her society, until she was married to Oscar. He had accepted the position in which Oscar had placed him, as the one means of reaching the end in view without exciting suspicion of

the truth—and he had encountered, as his reward for the sacrifice, my ignorant protest, my stupid opposition, set as obstacles in his way! There were the motives—the pure, the noble motives—which animated him, as I know them now. There is the right reading of the dogged language that mystified me, of the defiant manner that offended me; interpreted by the one light that I have to guide my pen—the light of later events!

“Well?” he said. “Are we allies, or not? Are you with me? or against me?”

I gave up attempting to understand him; and answered that plain question, plainly.

“I don’t deny that the consequences of un-deceiving her may be serious,” I said. “But, for all that, I will have no share in the cruelty of keeping her deceived.”

Nugent held up his forefinger, warningly

“Pause, and reflect, Madame Pratolungo! The mischief that you may do, as matters stand now, may be mischief that you can never repair. It’s useless to ask you to alter your mind. I only ask you to wait a little.

There is plenty of time before the wedding-day. Something may happen which will spare you the necessity of enlightening Lucilla with your own lips."

"What can happen?" I asked.

"Lucilla may yet see him, as we see him," Nugent answered. "Lucilla's own eyes may discover the truth."

"What! have you not abandoned your mad notion of curing her blindness, yet?"

"I will abandon my notion when the German surgeon tells me it is mad. Not before."

"Have you said anything about it to Oscar?"

"Not a word. I shall say nothing about it to anybody but you, until the German is safe on the shores of England."

"Do you expect him to arrive before the marriage?"

"Certainly! He would have left New York with me, but for one patient who still required his care. No new patients will tempt him to stay in America. His extraordinary success has made his fortune. The ambition of his life is to see England; and he can

afford to gratify it. He may be here by the next steamer that reaches Liverpool."

"And when he does come, you mean to bring him to Dimchurch?"

"Yes—unless Lucilla objects to it."

"Suppose Oscar objects? She is resigned to be blind for life. If you disturb that resignation with no useful result, you may make an unhappy woman of her for the rest of her days. In your brother's place, I should object to running that risk."

"My brother is doubly interested in running the risk. I repeat what I have already told you. The physical result will not be the only result, if her sight can be restored. There will be a new mind put into her as well as a new sense. Oscar has everything to dread from this morbid fancy of hers as long as she is blind. Only let her eyes correct her fancy—only let her see him as we see him, and get used to him, as we have got used to him; and Oscar's future with her is safe. Will you leave things as they are for the present, on the chance that the German surgeon may get here before the wedding-day?"

I consented to that ; being influenced, in spite of myself, by the remarkable coincidence between what Nugent had just said of Lucilla, and what Lucilla had said to me of herself earlier in the day. It was impossible to deny that Nugent's theory, wild as it sounded, found its confirmation, so far, in Lucilla's view of her own case. Having settled the difference between us in this way, for the time being, I shifted our talk next to the difficult question of Nugent's relations towards Lucilla. "How are you to meet her again," I said, "after the effect you produced on her at the meeting to-day?"

He spoke far more pleasantly in discussing this side of the subject. His language and his manner both improved together.

"If I could have had my own way," he said, "Lucilla would have been relieved, by this time, of all fear of meeting with me again. She would have heard from you, or from Oscar, that business had obliged me to leave Dimchurch."

"Does Oscar object to let you go?"

"He won't hear of my going. I did my best to persuade him—I promised to return for the marriage. Quite useless! 'If you leave me here by myself,' he said, 'to think over the mischief I have done, and the sacrifices I have forced on you—you will break my heart. You don't know what an encouragement your presence is to me; you don't know what a blank you will leave in my life if you go!' I am as weak as Oscar is, when Oscar speaks to me in that way. Against my own convictions, against my own wishes, I yielded. I should have been better away—far, far better away!"

He said those closing words in a tone that startled me. It was nothing less than a tone of despair. How little I understood him then! how well I understand him now! In those melancholy accents, spoke the last of his honour, the last of his truth. Miserable, innocent Lucilla! Miserable, guilty Nugent!

"And now you remain at Dimchurch," I resumed, "what are you to do?"

"I must do my best to spare her the nervous suffering which I unwillingly inflicted on her

to-day. The morbid repulsion that she feels in my presence is not to be controlled—I can see that plainly. I shall keep out of her way ; gradually withdrawing myself, so as not to force my absence on her attention. I shall pay fewer and fewer visits at the rectory, and remain longer and longer at Browndown every day. After they are married——” He suddenly stopped ; the words seemed to stick in his throat. He busied himself in relighting his cigar, and took a long time to do it.

“ After they are married,” I repeated.
“ What then ?”

“ When Oscar is married, Oscar will not find my presence indispensable to his happiness. I shall leave Dimchurch.”

“ You will have to give a reason.”

“ I shall give the true reason. I can find no studio here big enough for me—as I have told you. And, even if I could find a studio, I should be doing no good, if I remained at Dimchurch. My intellect would contract, my brains would rust in this remote place. Let Oscar live his quiet married life here. And let me go to the atmosphere that is fitter

for me — the atmosphere of London or Paris."

He sighed, and fixed his eyes absently on the open hilly view from the summer-house door.

"It's strange to see *you* depressed," I said. "Your spirits seemed to be quite inexhaustible on that first evening when you interrupted Mr. Finch over *Hamlet*."

He threw away the end of his cigar, and laughed bitterly.

"We artists are always in extremes," he said. "What do you think I was wishing just before you spoke to me?"

"I can't guess."

"I was wishing I had never come to Dimchurch!"

Before I could return a word, on my side, Lucilla's voice reached our ears, calling to me from the garden. Nugent instantly sprang to his feet.

"Have we said all we need say?" he asked.

"Yes—for to-day, at any rate."

"For to-day, then—good-bye!"

He leapt up; caught the cross-bar of wood

over the entrance to the summer-house ; and, swinging himself on to the low garden-wall beyond, disappeared in the field on the other side. I answered Lucilla's call, and hastened away to find her. We met on the lawn. She looked wild and pale, as if something had frightened her.

“ Anything wrong at the rectory ?” I asked.

“ Nothing wrong,” she answered—“ except with Me. The next time I complain of fatigue, don't advise me to go and lie down on my bed.”

“ Why not ? I looked in at you, before I came out here. You were fast asleep—the picture of repose.”

“ Repose ? You never were more mistaken in your life. I was in the agony of a horrid dream.”

“ You were perfectly quiet when I saw you.”

“ It must have been after you saw me, then. Let me come and sleep with you, to-night. I daren't be by myself, if I dream of it again.”

“ What did you dream of ?”

“ I dreamt that I was standing, in my

wedding dress, before the altar of a strange church; and that a clergyman, whose voice I had never heard before, was marrying me——”

She stopped, impatiently waving her hand before her in the air. “Blind as I am,” she said, “I see him again now!”

“The bridegroom?”

“Yes.”

“Oscar?”

“No.”

“Who then?”

“Oscar’s brother. Nugent Dubourg.”

(Have I mentioned before, that I am sometimes a great fool? If I have not, I beg to mention it now. I burst out laughing.)

“What is there to laugh at?” she asked angrily. “I saw his hideous, discoloured face—I am never blind in my dreams! I felt his blue hand put the ring on my finger. Wait! The worst part of it is to come. I married Nugent Dubourg willingly—married him without a thought of my engagement to Oscar. Yes! yes! I know it’s only a dream. I can’t bear to think of it, for all that. I don’t like to

be false to Oscar even in a dream. Let us go to him. I want to hear him tell me that he loves me. Come to Browndown. I'm so nervous, I don't like going by myself. Come to Browndown!"

I have another humiliating confession to make—I tried to get off going to Browndown. (So like those unfeeling French people, isn't it?)

But I had my reason too. If I disapproved of the resolution at which Nugent had arrived, I viewed far more unfavourably the selfish weakness on Oscar's part, which had allowed his brother to sacrifice himself. Lucilla's lover had sunk to something very like a despicable character in my estimation. I felt that I might let him see what I thought of him, if I found myself in his company at that moment.

"Considering the object that you have in view, my dear," I said to Lucilla, "do you think you want *me* at Browndown?"

"Haven't I already told you?" she asked impatiently. "I am so nervous—so completely upset—that I don't feel equal to going out by myself. Have you no sympathy for

me? Suppose *you* had dreamed that you were marrying Nugent instead of Oscar?"

"Ah, bah! what of that? I should only have dreamed that I was marrying the most agreeable man of the two."

"The most agreeable man of the two! There you are again—always unjust to Oscar."

"My love! if you could see for yourself, you would learn to appreciate Nugent's good qualities, as I do."

"I prefer appreciating Oscar's good qualities."

"You are prejudiced, Lucilla."

"So are you!"

"You happen to have met Oscar first."

"That has nothing to do with it?"

"Yes! yes! If Nugent had followed us, instead of Oscar, if, of those two charming voices which are both the same, one had spoken instead of the other——"

"I won't hear a word more!"

"Tra-la-la-la! It happens to have been Oscar. Turn it the other way—and Nugent might have been the man."

“ Madame Pratolungo, I am not accustomed to be insulted ! I have no more to say to you.”

With that dignified reply, and with the loveliest colour in her face that you ever saw in your life, my darling Lucilla turned her pretty back on me, and set off for Browndown by herself.

Ah, my rash tongue ! Ah, my nasty foreign temper ! Why did I let her irritate me ? I, the elder of the two—why did I not set her an example of self-control ? Who can tell ? When does a woman know why she does anything ? Did Eve know—when Mr. Serpent offered her the apple—why she ate it ? not she !

What was to be done now ? Two things were to be done. First thing :—To cool myself down. Second thing :—To follow Lucilla, and kiss and make it up.

Either I took some time to cool—or, in the irritation of the moment, Lucilla walked faster than usual. She had got to Browndown before I could overtake her. On opening the house-door, I heard them talking. It would

hardly do to disturb them—especially now I was in disgrace. While I was hesitating, and wondering what my next proceeding had better be, my eye was attracted by a letter lying on the hall-table. I looked (one is always inquisitive in those idle moments when one doesn't know what to do) —I looked at the address. The letter was directed to Nugent ; and the post-mark was Liverpool.

I drew the inevitable conclusion. The German oculist was in England !





CHAPTER THE FOURTH.

HE CROSSES THE RUBICON.

JWAS still in doubt, whether to enter the room, or to wait outside until she left Browndown to return to the rectory—when Lucilla's keen sense of hearing decided the question which I had been unable to settle for myself. The door of the room opened; and Oscar advanced into the hall.

“Lucilla insisted that she heard somebody outside,” he said. “Who could have guessed it was you? Why did you wait in the hall? Come in! come in!”

He held open the door for me; and I went in. Oscar announced me to Lucilla. “It was Madame Pratolungo you heard,” he said.

She took no notice either of him or of me. A heap of flowers from Oscar's garden lay in her lap. With the help of her clever fingers, she was sorting them to make a nosegay, as quickly and as tastefully as if she had possessed the sense of sight. In all my experience of that charming face, it had never looked so hard as it looked now. Nobody would have recognised her likeness to the Madonna of Raphael's picture. Offended—mortally offended with me—I saw it at a glance.

“I hope you will forgive my intrusion, Lucilla, when you know my motive,” I said. “I have followed you here to make my excuses.”

“Oh, don't think of making excuses!” she rejoined, giving three-fourths of her attention to the flowers, and one-fourth to me. “It's a pity you took the trouble of coming here. I quite agree with what you said in the garden. Considering the object I had in view at Browndown, I could not possibly expect you to accompany me. True! quite true!”

I kept my temper. Not that I am a

patient woman not that I possess a meek disposition. Very far from it, I regret to say ! Nevertheless, I kept my temper—so far.

“ I wish to apologise for what I said in the garden,” I resumed. “ I spoke thoughtlessly, Lucilla. It is impossible that I could intentionally offend you.”

I might as well have spoken to one of the chairs. The whole of her attention became absorbed in the breathless interest of making her nosegay.

“ *Was* I offended ?” she said, addressing herself to the flowers. “ Excessively foolish of me, if I was.” She suddenly became conscious of my existence. “ You had a perfect right to express your opinion,” she said loftily. “ Accept *my* excuses if I appeared to dispute it.”

She tossed her pretty head ; she showed her brightest colour ; she tapped her nice little foot briskly on the floor. (Oh, Lucilla ! Lucilla !) I still kept my temper. More, by this time (I admit), for Oscar’s sake than for her sake. He looked so distressed, poor fel-

low—so painfully anxious to interfere, without exactly knowing how.

“ My dear Lucilla !” he began. “ Surely you might answer Madame Pratolungo——”

She petulantly interrupted him, with another toss of the head—a little higher than the last.

“ I don’t attempt to answer Madame Pratolungo ! I prefer admitting that Madame Pratolungo may have been quite right. I dare say I am ready to fall in love with the first man who comes my way. I dare say—if I had met your brother before I met you—I should have fallen in love with *him*. Quite likely !”

“ Quite likely—as you say,” answered poor Oscar, humbly. “ I am sure I think it very lucky for *me*, that you didn’t meet Nugent first.”

She threw her lapful of flowers away from her on the table at which she was sitting. She became perfectly furious with him for taking my side. I permitted myself (the poor child could not see it, remember,) the harmless indulgence of a smile.

"You agree with Madame Pratolungo," she said to him viciously. "Madame Pratolungo thinks your brother a much more agreeable man than you."

Humble Oscar shook his head in melancholy acknowledgment of this self-evident fact. "There can be no two opinions about that," he said resignedly.

She stamped her foot on the carpet—and raised quite a little cloud of dust. My lungs are occasionally delicate. I permitted myself another harmless indulgence—indulgence in a slight cough. She heard the second indulgence—and suddenly controlled herself, the instant it reached her ears. I am afraid she took my cough as my commentary on what was going on.

"Come here, Oscar," she said, with a complete change of tone and manner. "Come and sit down by me."

Oscar obeyed.

"Put your arm round my waist."

Oscar looked at me. Having the use of his sight, he was sensible of the absurd side of the demonstration required of him—in the

presence of a third person. *She*, poor soul, strong in her blind insensibility to all shafts of ridicule shot from the eye, cared nothing for the presence of a third person. She repeated her commands, in a tone which said sharply, "Embrace me—I am not to be trifled with."

Oscar timidly put his arm round her waist with an appealing look at me. She issued another command instantly

"Say you love me."

Oscar hesitated.

"Say you love me!"

Oscar whispered it.

"Out loud!"

Endurance has its limits: I began to lose my temper. She could not have been more superbly indifferent to my presence, if there had been a cat in the room instead of a lady.

"Permit me to inform you," I said, "that I have not (as you appear to suppose) left the room."

She took no notice. She went on with her commands, rising irrepressibly from one amatory climax to another.

“ Give me a kiss !”

Unhappy Oscar—sacrificed between us—blushed. Stop ! Don’t revel prematurely in the greatest enjoyment a reader has—namely, catching a writer out in a mistake. I have not forgotten that his disfigured complexion would prevent his blush from showing on the surface. I beg to say I saw it under the surface—saw it in his expression I repeat—he blushed.

I felt it necessary to assert myself for the second time.

“ I have only one object in remaining in the room, Miss Finch. I merely wish to know whether you refuse to accept my excuses.”

“ Oscar ! give me a kiss !”

He still hesitated. She threw her arm round his neck. My duty to myself was plain—my duty was to go.

“ Good afternoon, Mr. Dubourg,” I said—and turned to the door. She heard me cross the room, and called to me to stop. I paused. There was a glass on the wall opposite to me. On the authority of the glass, I beg to mention that I paused in my most becoming manner.

Grace tempered with dignity : dignity tempered with grace.

“ Madame Pratolungo !”

“ Miss Finch ?”

“ This is the man who is not half so agreeable as his brother. Look !”

She tightened her hold round his neck, and gave him—ostentatiously gave him—the kiss which he was ashamed to give *her*. I advanced, in contemptuous silence, to the door. My attitude expressed disgust accompanied by sorrow : sorrow, accompanied by disgust.

“ Madame Pratolungo !”

I made no answer.

“ This is the man whom I should never have loved if I had happened to meet his brother first. Look !”

She put both arms round his neck ; and gave him a shower of kisses all in one. I indignantly withdrew. The door had been imperfectly closed when I had entered the room it was ajar. I pulled it open—and found myself face to face with Nugent Dubourg, standing by the table, with his letter from Liverpool in his hand ! He must have cer-

tainly heard Lucilla cast my own words back in my teeth—if he had heard no more.

I stopped short; looking at him in silent surprise. He smiled, and held out the open letter to me. Before we could speak, we heard the door of the room closed. Oscar had followed me out (shutting the door behind him) to apologise for Lucilla's behaviour to me. He explained what had happened to his brother. Nugent nodded, and tapped his open letter smartly. "Leave me to manage it. I shall give you something better to do than quarrelling among yourselves. You will hear what it is directly. In the meantime, I have got a message for our friend at the inn. Gootheridge is on his way here, to speak to me about altering the stable. Run and tell him I have other business on hand, and I can't keep my appointment to-day. Stop! Give him this at the same time, and ask him to leave it at the rectory."

He took one of his visiting cards out of the case, wrote a few lines on it in pencil, and handed it to his brother. Oscar (always ready to go on errands for Nugent) hurried out

to meet the landlord. Nugent turned to me.

“The German is in England,” he said.
“Now I may open my lips.”

“At once!” I exclaimed.

“At once. I have put off my own business (as you heard) in favour of this. My friend will be in London to-morrow. I mean to get my authority to consult him to-day, and to start to-morrow for town. Prepare yourself to meet one of the strangest characters you ever set eyes on! You saw me write on my card. It was a message to Mr. Finch, asking him to join us immediately (on important family business) at Browndown. As Lucilla’s father, he has a voice in the matter. When Oscar comes back, and when the rector joins us, our domestic privy council will be complete.”

He spoke with his customary spirit; he moved with his customary briskness—he had become quite himself again, since I had seen him last.

“I am stagnating in this place,” he went on, seeing that I noticed the change in him.

“ It puts me in spirits again, having something to do. I am not like Oscar—I must have action to stir my blood—action to keep me from fretting over my anxieties. How do you think I found the witness to my brother’s innocence at the Trial? In that way. I said to myself, ‘ I shall go mad if I don’t do something.’ I did something—and saved Oscar. I am going to do something again. Mark my words! Now I am stirring in it, Lucilla will recover her sight.”

“ This is a serious matter,” I said. “ Pray give it serious consideration.”

“ Consideration ?” he repeated. “ I hate the word. I always decide on the instant. If I am wrong in my view of Lucilla’s case, consideration is of no earthly use. If I am right, every day’s delay is a day of sight lost to the blind. I’ll wait for Oscar and Mr. Finch ; and then I’ll open the business. Why are we talking in the hall ? Come in !”

He led the way to the sitting-room. I had a new interest, now, in going back. Still, Lucilla’s behaviour hung on my mind. Suppose she treated me with renewed coldness

and keener contempt? I remained standing at the table in the hall. Nugent looked back at me, over his shoulder.

“Nonsense!” he said. “I’ll set things right. It’s beneath a woman like you to take notice of what a girl says in a pet. Come in!”

I doubt if I should have yielded to please any other living man. But, there is no denying it, some people have a magnetic attracting power over others. Nugent had that power over me. Against my own will—for I was really hurt and offended by her usage of me—I went back with him into the room.

Lucilla was still sitting in the place which she had occupied when I withdrew. On hearing the door open, and a man’s footsteps entering, she of course assumed that the man was Oscar. She had penetrated his object in leaving her to follow me out, and it had not improved her temper.

“Oh?” she said. “You have come back at last? I thought you had offered yourself as Madame Pratolungo’s escort to the rectory.” She stopped, with a sudden frown. Her quick ears had detected my return into the

room. "Oscar!" she exclaimed, "what does this mean? Madame Pratolungo and I have nothing more to say to each other. What has she come back for? Why don't you answer? This is infamous! I shall leave the room!"

The utterance of that final threat was followed so rapidly by its execution that, before Nugent (standing between her and the door) could get out of her way, she came in violent contact with him. She instantly caught him by the arm, and shook him angrily. "What does your silence mean? Is it at Madame Pratolungo's instigation that you are insulting me?"

I had just opened my lips to make one more attempt at reconciliation, by saying some pacifying words to her—when she planted that last sting in me. French flesh and blood (whatever English flesh and blood might have done) could bear no more. I silently turned my back on her, in a rage.

At the same moment, Nugent's eyes brightened as if a new idea had struck him. He gave me one significant look—and answered her in his brother's character. Whether he

was possessed at the moment by some demon of mischief; or whether he had the idea of trying to make Oscar's peace for him, before Oscar returned—was more than I could say at the time. I ought to have stopped it—I know. But my temper was in a flame. I was as spiteful as a cat and as fierce as a bear. I said to myself (in your English idiom), She wants taking down a peg; quite right, Mr. Nugent; do it. Shocking! shameful! no words are bad enough for me give it me well. Ah, Heaven! what is a human being in a rage? On my sacred word of honour, nothing but a human beast! The next time it happens to You, look at yourself in the glass; and you will find your soul gone out of you at your face, and nothing left but an animal—and a bad, a villainous bad animal too!

“ You ask what my silence means ? ” said Nugent.

He had only to model his articulation on his brother's slower manner of speaking as distinguished from his own, to be his brother himself. In saying those few first words, he did it so dexterously that I could have sworn

—if I had not seen him standing before me—
Oscar was in the room.

“Yes,” she said, “I ask that.”

“I am silent,” he answered, “because I
am waiting.”

“What are you waiting for?”

“To hear you make your apologies to
Madame Pratolungo.”

She started back a step. Submissive Oscar
was taking a peremptory tone with her for the
first time in his life. Submissive Oscar, in-
stead of giving her time to speak, sternly
went on.

“Madame Pratolungo has made her excuses
to *you*. You ought to receive them; you
ought to reciprocate them. It is distressing
to see you and hear you. You are behaving
ungratefully to your best friend.”

She raised her face, she raised her hands,
in blank amazement: she looked as if she
distrusted her own ears.

“Oscar!” she exclaimed. .

“Here I am,” said Oscar, opening the door
at the same moment.

She turned like lightning towards the place

from which he had spoken. She detected the deception which Nugent had practised on her, with a cry of indignation that rang through the room.

Oscar ran to her in alarm. She thrust him back violently.

“A trick!” she cried. “A mean, vile, cowardly trick played upon my blindness! Oscar! your brother has been imitating you; your brother has been speaking to me in your voice. And that woman who calls herself my friend—that woman stood by and heard him, and never told me. She encouraged it: she enjoyed it. The wretches! take me away from them. They are capable of any deceit. She always hated you, dear, from the first—she took up with your brother the moment he came here. When you marry me, it mustn’t be at Dimchurch; it must be in some place they don’t know of. There is a conspiracy between them against you and against me. Beware of them! beware of them! She said I should have fallen in love with your brother, if I had met him first. There is a deeper meaning in that, my love, than you can see.

It means that they will part us if they can. Ha ! I hear somebody moving ! Has he changed places with you ? Is it *you* whom I am speaking to now ? Oh, my blindness ! my blindness ! Oh, God ! of all your creatures, the most helpless, the most miserable, is the creature who can't see !"

I never heard anything in all my life so pitiable and so dreadful as the frantic suspicion and misery which tore their way out from her, in those words. She cut me to the heart. I had spoken rashly—I had behaved badly—but had I deserved this ? No ! no ! no ! I had *not* deserved it. I threw myself into a chair, and burst out crying. My tears scalded me ; my sobs choked me. If I had had poison in my hand, I would have drunk it—I was so furious and so wretched ; so hurt in my honour, so wounded at my heart.

The only voice that answered her was Nugent's. Reckless what the consequences might be—speaking, in his own proper person, from the opposite end of the room—he asked the all-important question which no human being had ever put to her yet.

“Are you sure, Lucilla, that you are blind for life?”

A dead silence followed the utterance of those words.

I brushed away the tears from my eyes, and looked up.

Oscar had been—as I supposed—holding her in his arms, silently soothing her, when his brother spoke. At the moment when I saw her, she had just detached herself from him. She advanced a step, towards the part of the room in which Nugent stood—and stopped, with her face turned towards him. Every faculty in her seemed to be suspended by the silent passage into her mind of the new idea that he had called up. Through childhood, girlhood, womanhood—never once waking or dreaming, had the prospect of restoration to sight presented itself within her range of contemplation, until now. Not a trace was left in her countenance of the indignation which Nugent had roused in her, hardly more than a moment since. Not a sign appeared indicating a return of the nervous suffering which the sense of his presence

had inflicted on her, earlier in the day. The one emotion in possession of her was astonishment—astonishment that had struck her dumb; astonishment that waited, helplessly and mechanically, to hear more.

I observed Oscar, next. His eyes were fixed on Lucilla—absorbed in watching her. He spoke to Nugent, without looking at him; animated, as it seemed, by a vague fear for Lucilla, which was slowly developing into a vague fear for himself.

“Mind what you are doing!” he said.
“Look at her, Nugent—look at her.”

Nugent approached his brother, circuitously, so as to place Oscar between Lucilla and himself.

“Have I offended you?” he asked.

Oscar looked at him in surprise. “Offended with you,” he answered, “after what you have forgiven, and what you have suffered, for my sake?”

“Still,” persisted the other, “there is something wrong.”

“I am startled, Nugent.”

“Startled—by what?”

“By the question you have just put to Lucilla.”

“You will understand me, and she will understand me, directly.”

While those words were passing between the brothers, my attention remained fixed on Lucilla. Her head had turned slowly towards the new position which Nugent occupied when he spoke to Oscar. With this exception, no other movement had escaped her. No sense of what the two men were saying to each other seemed to have entered her mind. To all appearance she had heard nothing, since Nugent had started the first doubt in her whether she was blind for life.

“Speak to her,” I said. “For God’s sake, don’t keep her in suspense, *now!*”

Nugent spoke.

“You have had reason to be offended with me, Lucilla. Let me, if I can, give you reason to be grateful to me, before I have done. When I was in New York, I became acquainted with a German surgeon, who had made a reputation and a fortune in America

by his skill in treating diseases of the eye. He had been especially successful in curing cases of blindness given up as hopeless by other surgeons. I mentioned your case to him. He could say nothing positively (as a matter of course) without examining you. All he could do was to place his services at my disposal, when he came to England. I for one, Lucilla, decline to consider you blind for life, until this skilful man sees no more hope for you than the English surgeons have seen. If there is the faintest chance still left of restoring your sight, his is, I firmly believe, the one hand that can do it. He is now in England. Say the word—and I will bring him to Dimchurch."

She slowly lifted her hands to her head, and held it as if she was holding her reason in its place. Her colour changed from pale to red—from red to pale once more. She drew a long, deep, heavy breath—and dropped her hands again, recovering from the shock. The change that followed, held us all three breathless. It was beautiful to see her. It was awful to see her. A mute

ecstacy of hope transfigured her face ; a heavenly smile played serenely on her lips. She was among us, and yet apart from us. In the still light of evening, shining in on her from the window, she stood absorbed in her own rapture—the silent creature of another sphere ! There was a moment when she overcame me with admiration, and another moment when she overcame me with fear. Both the men felt it. Both signed to me to speak to her first.

I advanced a few steps. I tried to consider with myself what I should say. It was useless. I could neither think nor speak. I could only look at her. I could only say, nervously—

“ Lucilla !”

She came back to the world—she came back to *us*—with a little start, and a faint flush of colour in her cheeks. She turned herself towards the place from which I had spoken, and whispered—

“ Come !”

In a moment, my arms were round her. Her head sank on my bosom. We were re-

conciled without a word. We were friends again, sisters again, in an instant.

“Have I been fainting? have I been sleeping?” she said to me in low, bewildered tones. “Am I just awake? Is this Browndown?” She suddenly lifted her head. “Nugent! are you there?”

“Yes.”

She gently withdrew herself from me, and approached Nugent.

“Did you speak to me, just now? Was it you who put the doubt into my mind, whether I am really doomed to be blind for life? Surely, I have not fancied it? Surely, you said the man was coming, and the time coming?” Her voice suddenly rose. “The man who may cure me! the time when I may see!”

“I said it, Lucilla. I meant it, Lucilla.”

“Oscar! Oscar!! Oscar!!!”

I stepped forward to lead her to him. Nugent touched me, and pointed to Oscar, as I took her hand. He was standing before the glass—with an expression of despair which I see again while I write these lines—he was

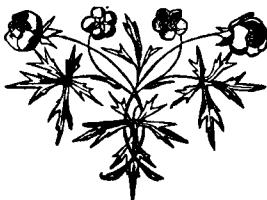
standing close to the glass ; looking in silence at the hideous reflection of his face. In sheer pity, I hesitated to take her to him. She stepped forward, and, stretching out her hand, touched his shoulder. The reflection of *her* charming face appeared behind *his* face in the glass. She raised herself on tiptoe, with both hands on him, and said, “The time is coming, my darling, when I may see You !”

With a cry of joy, she drew his face to her, and kissed him on the forehead. His head fell on his breast when she released it : he covered his face with his hands, and stifled, for the moment, all outward expression of the pang that wrung him. I drew her rapidly away, before her quick sensibilities had time to warn her that something was wrong. Even as it was, she resisted me. Even as it was, she asked suspiciously, “Why do you take me away from him ?”

What excuse could I make ? I was at my wits’ end.

She repeated the question. For once, Fortune favoured us. A timely knock at the

door stopped her just as she was trying to release herself from me. "Somebody coming in," I said. The servant entered, as I spoke, with a letter from the rectory.





CHAPTER THE FIFTH.

PARLIAMENTARY SUMMARY

CH, the welcome interruption ! After the agitation that we had suffered, we all stood equally in need of some such relief as this. It was absolutely a luxury to fall back again into the common-place daily routine of life. I asked to whom the letter was addressed ? Nugent answered, " The letter is addressed to me ; and the writer is Mr. Finch."

Having read the letter, he turned to Lucilla. " I sent a message to your father, asking him to join us here," he said. " Mr. Finch writes back to say that his duties keep him at home, and to suggest that the rectory is the fitter place for the discussion of family matters.

Have you any objection to return to the house?
And do you mind going on first with Madame
Pratolungo?"

Lucilla's quick suspicion was instantly aroused.

"Why not with Oscar?" she asked.

"Your father's note suggests to me," replied Nugent, "that he is a little hurt at the short notice I gave him of our discussion here. I thought—if you and Madame Pratolungo went on first—that you might make our peace with the rector, and assure him that we meant no disrespect, before Oscar and I appeared. Don't you think yourself you would make it easier for *us*, if you did that?"

Having contrived in this dexterous way to separate Oscar and Lucilla, and to gain time for composing and fortifying his brother before they met again, Nugent opened the door for us to go out. Lucilla and I left the twins together, in the modest little room which had witnessed a scene, alike memorable to all of us for its interest at the time, and for the results which were to come of it in the future.

Half an hour later, we were all assembled at the rectory.

Our adjourned debate—excepting one small suggestion emanating from myself—was a debate which led to nothing. It may be truly described as resolving itself into the delivery of an Oration by Mr. Finch. Subject, the assertion of Mr. Finch's dignity.

On this occasion (having matters of more importance on hand) I take the liberty of cutting the reverend gentleman's speech by the pattern of the reverend gentleman's stature. Short in figure, the rector shall be here, for the first time in his life, short in language too.

Reverend Finch rose, and said—he objected to everything. To receive a message on a card instead of a proper note. To being expected to present himself at Browndown at a moment's notice. To being the last person informed (instead of the first) of Mr. Nugent Dubourg's exaggerated and absurd view of the case of his afflicted child. To the German surgeon, as being certainly a foreigner and a stranger, and possibly a quack. To the slur

implied on British Surgery by bringing the foreigner to Dimchurch. To the expense involved in the same proceeding. Finally to the whole scope and object of Mr. Nugent Dubourg's proposal, which had for its origin rebellion against the decrees of an all-wise Providence, and for its result the disturbance of his daughter's mind—"under My influence, sir, a mind in a state of Christian resignation : under Your influence, a mind in a state of infidel revolt." With those concluding remarks, the reverend gentleman sat down—and paused for a reply.

A remarkable result followed, which might be profitably permitted to take place in some other Parliaments. Nobody replied.

Mr. Nugent Dubourg rose—no ! sat—and said, he declined to take any part in the proceedings. He was quite ready to wait, until the end justified the means which he proposed to employ. For the rest, his conscience was at ease ; and he was entirely at Miss Finch's service.

Mr. Oscar Dubourg, sitting hidden from notice behind his brother, followed his bro-

ther's example. The decision in the matter under discussion rested with Miss Finch alone. He had no opinion of his own to offer on it.

Miss Finch herself, appealed to next:— Had but one reply to give. With all possible respect for her father, she ventured to think that neither he nor any one, possessing the sense of vision, could quite enter into her feelings as the circumstances then were. If there really was any chance of her recovering her sight, the least she could do would be to give that chance a fair trial. She entreated Mr. Nugent Dubourg not to lose one unnecessary moment in bringing the German surgeon to Dimchurch.

Mrs. Finch, called upon next. Spoke after some little delay, caused by the loss of her pocket-handkerchief. Would not presume to differ in opinion with her husband, whom she had never yet known to be otherwise than perfectly right about everything. But, if the German surgeon *did* come, and if Mr. Finch saw no objection to it, she would much like to consult him (gratis, if possible) on the sub-

ject of “baby’s eyes.” Mrs. Finch was proceeding to explain that there was happily nothing the matter, that she could see, with the infant’s eyes at that particular moment, and that she merely wished to take a skilled medical opinion, in the event of something happening on some future occasion—when she was called to order by Mr. Finch. The reverend gentleman, at the same time, appealed to Madame Pratolungo to close the debate by giving frank expression to her own opinion.

Madame Pratolungo, speaking in conclusion, remarked :—

That the question of consulting the German surgeon appeared (after what had fallen from Miss Finch) to be a question which had passed beyond the range of any expression of feeling on the part of other persons. That she proposed, accordingly, to look, beyond the consultation, at the results which might follow it. That, contemplating these possible results, she held very strong views of her own, and would proceed to give frank expression to them as follows. That in her opinion, the proposed

investigation of the chances which might exist of restoring Miss Finch's sight, involved consequences far too serious to be trusted to the decision of any one man, no matter how skilful or how famous he might be. That, in pursuance of this view, she begged to suggest (1) the association of an eminent English oculist with the eminent German oculist; (2) an examination of Miss Finch's case by both the professional gentlemen, consulting on it together; and (3) a full statement of the opinions at which they might respectively arrive, to be laid before the meeting now assembled, and to become the subject of a renewed discussion before any decisive measures were taken. Lastly, that this proposal be now submitted, in the form of a resolution, and forthwith (if necessary) put to the vote.

Resolution, as above, put to the vote.

Majority—Ayes.

Miss Finch.

Mr. Nugent Dubourg.

Mr. Oscar Dubourg.

Madame Pratolungo.

Minority—Noes.

No (on the score of expense), Mr. Finch.

No (because Mr. F. says No), Mrs. Finch.

Resolution carried by a majority of two.

Debate adjourned to a day to be hereafter decided on.

By the first train the next morning, Nugent Dubourg started for London.

At luncheon, the same day, a telegram arrived, reporting his proceedings in the following terms :—

“ I have seen my friend. He is at our service. He is also quite willing to consult with any English oculist whom we may choose. I am just off to find the man. Expect a second telegram later in the day.”

The second telegram reached us in the evening, and ran thus :—

“ Everything is settled. The German oculist and the English oculist leave London with me, by the twelve-forty train to-morrow afternoon.”

After reading this telegram to Lucilla, I sent it to Oscar at Browndown. Judge for yourself how *he* slept, and how *we* slept, that night !



CHAPTER THE SIXTH.

HERR GROSSE.

SEVERAL circumstances deserving to be mentioned here, took place in the early part of the day on which we expected the visit of the two oculists. I have all the will to relate them—but the capacity to do it completely fails me.

When I look back at that eventful morning, I recal a scene of confusion and suspense, the bare recollection of which seems to upset my mind again, even at this distance of time. Things and persons all blend distractedly one with another. I see the charming figure of my blind Lucilla, robed in rose-colour and white, flitting hither and thither, in the house and out of the house—at one time mad with

impatience for the arrival of the surgeons, at another, shuddering with apprehension of the coming ordeal, and the coming disappointment which might follow. A moment more—and, just as my mind has seized it, the fair figure melts and merges into the miserable apparition of Oscar; hovering and hesitating between Browndown and the rectory; painfully conscious of the new complications introduced into his position towards Lucilla by the new state of things, and yet not man enough, even yet, to seize the opportunity, and set himself right. Another moment passes, and a new figure—a little strutting consequential figure—forces its way into the foreground, before I am ready for it. I hear a big voice booming in my ear, with big language to correspond. “No, Madame Pratolungo, nothing will induce me to sanction by my presence this insane medical consultation, this extravagant and profane attempt to reverse the decrees of an all-wise Providence by purely human means. My foot is down—I use the language of the people, observe, to impress it the more strongly on your mind—My Foot is

down!" Another moment yet, and Finch and Finch's Foot disappear over my mental horizon just as my eye has caught them. Damp Mrs. Finch, and the baby whose everlasting programme is suction and sleep, take the vacant place. Mrs. Finch pledges me with watery earnestness to secrecy ; and then confides her intention of escaping her husband's supervision if she can, and bringing British surgery and German surgery to bear both together (*gratis*) on baby's eyes. Conceive these persons all twisting and turning in the convolutions of my brains, as if those brains were a labyrinth ; with the sayings and doings of one, confusing themselves with the sayings and doings of the other—with a thin stream of my own private anxieties (comprehending luncheon on a side-table for the doctors) trickling at intervals through it all—and you will not wonder if I take a jump, like a sheep, over some six hours of precious time, and present my solitary self to your eye, posted alone in the sitting-room to receive the council of surgeons on its arrival at the house.

I had but two consolations to sustain me.

First, a Mayonnaise of chicken of my own making on the luncheon-table, which, as a work of Art, was simply adorable—I say no more. Secondly, my green silk dress, trimmed with my mother's famous lace—another work of Art, equally adorable with the first. Whether I looked at the luncheon-table, or whether I looked in the glass, I could feel that I worthily asserted my nation ; I could say to myself, Even in this remote corner of the earth, the pilgrim of civilisation searching for the elegant luxuries of life, looks, and sees —France supreme !

The clock chimed the quarter past three. Lucilla, wearying, for the hundredth time of waiting in her own room, put her head in at the door, and still repeated the never-changing question—

“ No signs of them yet ?”

“ None, my love.”

“ Oh, how much longer will they keep us waiting !”

“ Patience, Lucilla—patience !”

She disappeared again, with a weary sigh.

Five minutes more passed ; and old Zillah peeped into the room next.

“ Here they are, ma’am, in a chaise at the gate !”

I shook out the skirts of my green silk, I cast a last inspiriting glance at the Mayonnaise. Nugent’s cheerful voice reached me from the garden, conducting the strangers. “ This way, gentlemen—follow me.” A pause. Steps outside. The door opened. Nugent brought them in.

Herr Grosse, from America. Mr. Sebright of London.

The German gave a little start when my name was mentioned. The Englishman remained perfectly unaffected by it. Herr Grosse had heard of my glorious Pratolungo. Mr. Sebright was barbarously ignorant of his existence. I shall describe Herr Grosse first, and shall take the greatest pains with him.

A squat broad sturdy body, waddling on a pair of short bandy legs : slovenly, shabby, unbrushed clothes ; a big square bilious-yellow face, surmounted by a mop of thick iron-grey hair ; dark beetle-brows ; a pair of staring,

fierce, black, goggle eyes, with huge circular spectacles standing up like fortifications in front of them ; a shaggy beard and moustache of mixed black, white, and grey ; a prodigious cameo ring on the forefinger of one hairy hand ; the other hand always in and out of a deep silver snuff-box like a small tea-caddy ; a rough rasping voice ; a diabolically humorous smile ; a curtly confident way of speaking ; resolution, independence, power, expressed all over him from head to foot—there is the portrait of the man who held in his hands (if Nugent was to be trusted) the restoration of Lucilla's sight !

The English oculist was as unlike his German colleague as it is possible for one human being to be to another.

Mr. Sebright was slim and spare, and scrupulously (painfully) clean and neat. His smooth light hair was carefully parted ; his well-shaved face exhibited two little crisp morsels of whisker about two inches long, and no hair more. His decent black clothes were perfectly made ; he wore no ornaments, not even a watch-chain ; he moved deliberately, he spoke gravely and quietly ; disciplined at-

tention looked coldly at you out of his light grey eyes ; and said, Here I am if you want me, in every movement of his thin finely-cut lips. A thoroughly capable man, beyond all doubt—but defend me from accidentally sitting next to him at dinner, or travelling with him for my only companion on a long journey !

I received these distinguished persons with my best grace. Herr Grosse complimented me in return on my illustrious name, and shook hands. Mr. Sebright said it was a beautiful day, and bowed. The German, the moment he was at liberty to look about him, looked at the luncheon-table. The Englishman looked out of window.

“ Will you take some refreshment, gentlemen ? ”

Herr Grosse nodded his shock head in high approval. His wild eyes glared greedily at the Mayonnaise through his prodigious spectacles. “ Aha ! I like that,” said the illustrious surgeon, pointing at the dish with his ringed forefinger. “ You know how to make him—you make him with creams. Is he

chickens or lobsters? I like lobsters best, but chickens is goot too. The garnish is lofely—anchovy, olive, beetroots, brown, green, red on the fat white sauce. This I call a heavenly dish. He is nice-cool in two different ways; nice-cool to the eye, nice-cool to the taste. Soh! we will break into his inside. Madame Pratolungo, you shall begin. Here goes for the liver-wings!"

In this extraordinary English—turning words in the singular into words in the plural, and banishing from the British vocabulary the copulative conjunction "and"—Herr Grosse announced his readiness to sit down to lunch. He was politely recalled from the Mayonnaise to the patient by his discreet English colleague.

"I beg your pardon," said Mr. Sebright. "Would it not be advisable to see the young lady, before we do anything else? I am obliged to return to London by the next train."

Herr Grosse—with a fork in one hand and a spoon in the other, and a napkin tied round his neck—stared piteously; shook his shock head; and turned his back on the Mayonnaise, with a heavy heart at parting.

“Goot. We shall do our works first : then eat our lunches afterwards. Where is the patients ? Come-begin-begin !” He removed the napkin, blew a sigh (there is no other way of expressing it)—and plunged his finger and thumb into his tea-caddy snuff-box. “Where is the patients ?” he repeated irritably. “Why is she not close-handy in here ?”

“She is waiting in the next room,” I said. “I will bring her in directly. You will make allowances for her, gentlemen, I am sure, if you find her a little nervous ?” I added, looking at both the oculists. Silent Mr. Sebright bowed. Herr Grosse grinned diabolically, and said, “Make your mind easy, my goot creature. I am not such a brutes as I look !”

“Where is Oscar ?” asked Nugent, as I passed him on my way to Lucilla’s room.

“After altering his mind a dozen times at least,” I replied, “he has decided on not being present at the examination.”

I had barely said the words before the door opened, and Oscar entered the room. He had altered his mind for the thirteenth time—and here he was, as the result of it !

Herr Grosse burst out with an exclamation in his own language, at the sight of Oscar's face. "Ach, Gott!" he exclaimed, "he has been taking Nitrates of Silvers. His complexions is spoilt. Poor boys! poor boys!" He shook his shaggy head—turned—and spat compassionately into a corner of the room. Oscar looked offended; Mr. Sebright looked disgusted; Nugent thoroughly enjoyed it. I left the room, and closed the door behind me.

I had not taken two steps in the corridor when I heard the door opened again. Looking back directly, I found myself, to my amazement, face to face with Herr Grosse; staring ferociously at me through his spectacles, and offering me his arm.

"Hosh!" said the famous oculist in a heavy whisper. "Say nothing to nobody. I am come to help you."

"To help me?" I repeated.

Herr Grosse nodded vehemently—so vehemently that his prodigious spectacles hopped up and down on his nose.

"What did you tell me just now?" he

asked. " You told me the patients was nervous. Goot ! I am come to go with you to the patients, and help you to fetch her. Soh ! soh ! I am not such a brutes as I look. Come-begin-begin ! Where is she ? "

I hesitated for a moment about introducing this remarkable ambassador into Lucilla's bedroom. One look at him decided me. After all, he was a doctor—and such an ugly one ! I took his arm.

We went together into Lucilla's room. She started up from the sofa on which she was reclining when she heard the strange footsteps entering, side by side with mine.

" Who is it ? " she cried.

" It is me, my dears," said Herr Grosse. " Ach, Gott ! what a pretty girls ! Here is jost the complexions I like—nice-fair ! nice-fair ! I am come to see what I can do, my pretty Miss, for this eyes of yours. If I can let the light in on you—hey ! you will lofe me, won't you ? You will kees even an ugly Germans like me. Soh ! Come under my arm. We will go back into the odder rooms.

There is an odder one waiting to let the light in too—Mr. Sebrights. Two surgeon-optic to one pretty Miss—English surgeon-optic! German surgeon-optic—hey! between us we shall cure this nice girls. Madame Pratolungo, here is my odder arms at your service. Hey! what? You look at my coat-sleeve. He is shabby-greasy—I am ashamed of him. No matter! You have got Mr. Sebrights to look at in the odder rooms. He is spick-span, beautiful-new. Come! Forwards! Marsch!"

Nugent, waiting in the corridor, threw the door open for us. "Isn't he delightful?" Nugent whispered behind me, pointing to his friend. Escorted by Herr Grosse, we made a magnificent entry into the room. Our German doctor had done Lucilla good already. The examination was relieved of all its embarrassments and its terrors at the outset. Herr Grosse had made her laugh—Herr Grosse had set her completely at her ease.

Mr. Sebright and Oscar were talking together in a perfectly friendly way when we

returned to the sitting-room. The reserved Englishman appeared to have his attraction for the shy Oscar. Even Mr. Sebright was struck by Lucilla ; his cold face lit up with interest when he was presented to her. He placed a chair for her in front of the window. There was a warmth in his tone which I had not heard yet, when he begged her to be seated in that place. She took the chair. Mr. Sebright thereupon drew back, and bowed to *Herr Grosse*, with a courteous wave of his hand towards Lucilla which signified, “ You first !”

Herr Grosse met this advance with a counter-wave of the hand, and a vehement shake of his shock-head, which signified, “ I couldn’t think of such a thing !”

“ Pardon me,” entreated Mr. Sebright. “ As my senior, as a visitor to England, as a master in our art.”

Herr Grosse responded by regaling himself with three pinches of snuff in rapid succession —a pinch as senior, a pinch as visitor to England, a pinch as master in the art. An awful pause followed. Neither of the sur-

geons would take precedence of the other. Nugent interfered.

“Miss Finch is waiting,” he said. “Come, Grosse, you were first presented to her. You examine her first.”

Herr Grosse took Nugent’s ear between his finger and thumb, and gave it a good-humoured pinch. “You clever boys!” he said. “You have the right word always at the tips of your tongue.” He waddled to Lucilla’s chair; and stopped short with a scandalised look. Oscar was bending over her, and whispering to her with her hand in his. “Hey! what?” cried Herr Grosse. “Is this a third surgeon-optic? What, sir! you treat young Miss’s eyes by taking hold of young Miss’s hand? You are a Quack. Get out!” Oscar withdrew—not very graciously. Herr Grosse took a chair in front of Lucilla, and removed his spectacles. As a short-sighted man, he had necessarily excellent eyes for all objects which were sufficiently near to him. He bent forward, with his face close to Lucilla’s, and parted her eyelids alternately with his finger and thumb; peering

attentively, first into one eye, then into the other.

It was a moment of breathless interest. Who could say what an influence on her future life might be exercised by this quaint kindly uncouth little foreign man? How anxiously we watched those shaggy eyebrows, those piercing goggle eyes! And, oh, heavens, how disappointed we were at the first result! Lucilla suddenly gave a little irrepressible shudder of disgust. Herr Grosse drew back from her, and glared at her benignantly with his diabolical smile.

“Aha!” he said. “I see what it is. I snuff, I smoke, I reek of tobaccos. The pretty Miss smells me. She says in her inmost heart—Ach Gott, how he stink!”

Lucilla burst into a fit of laughter. Herr Grosse, unaffectedly amused on his side, grinned with delight, and snatched her handkerchief out of her apron-pocket. “Gif me scents,” said this excellent German. “I shall stop up her nose with her handkerchiefs. So she will not smell my tobacco-stinks—all will be nice-right again—we shall go on.” I gave

him some lavender-water from a scent-bottle on the table. He gravely drenched the handkerchief with it, and popped it suddenly on Lucilla's nose. "Hold him there, Miss. You cannot for the life of you smell Grosse now. Goot! We may go on again."

He took a magnifying glass out of his waistcoat pocket, and waited till Lucilla had fairly exhausted herself with laughing. Then the examination—so cruelly grotesque in itself, so terribly serious in the issues which it involved—resumed its course: Herr Grosse glaring at his patient through his magnifying glass; Lucilla leaning back in the chair, holding the handkerchief over her nose.

A minute, or more, passed—and the ordeal of the examination came to an end.

Herr Grosse put back his magnifying glass with a grunt which sounded like a grunt of relief, and snatched the handkerchief away from Lucilla.

"Ach! what a nasty smell!" he said, holding the handkerchief to his nose with a grimace of disgust. "Tobaccos is much better than this." He solaced his nostrils,

offended by the lavender water, with a huge pinch of snuff. "Now I am going to talk," he went on. "See! I keep my distance. You don't want your handkerchiefs — you smell me no more."

"Am I blind for life?" said Lucilla. "Pray, pray tell me, sir! Am I blind for life?"

"Will you kees me if I tell you?"

"Oh, do consider how anxious I am! Pray, pray, pray tell me!"

She tried to go down on her knees before him. He held her back firmly and kindly in her chair.

"Now! now! now! you be nice-goot, and tell me this frst. When you are out in the garden, taking your little lazy lady's walks on a shiny-sunny day, is it all the same to your eyes as if you were lying in your bed in the middles of the night?"

"No."

"Hah! You know it is nice-light at one time? you know it is horrid-dark at the odder?"

"Yes."

“Then why you ask me if you are blind for life? If you can see as much as that, you are not properly blind at all!”

She clasped her hands, with a low cry of delight. “Oh, where is Oscar?” she said softly. “Where is Oscar?” I looked round for him. He was gone. While his brother and I had been hanging spell-bound over the surgeon’s questions and the patient’s answers, he must have stolen silently out of the room.

Herr Grosse rose, and vacated the chair in favour of Mr. Sebright. In the ecstasy of the new hope now confirmed in her, Lucilla seemed to be unconscious of the presence of the English oculist, when he took his colleague’s place. His grave face looked more serious than ever, as he too produced a magnifying glass from his pocket, and, gently parting the patient’s eyelids, entered on the examination of her blindness, in his turn.

The investigation by Mr. Sebright lasted a much longer time than the investigation by Herr Grosse. He pursued it in perfect

silence. When he had done, he rose without a word, and left Lucilla as he had found her, rapt in the trance of her own happiness—thinking, thinking, thinking of the time when she should open her eyes in the new morning, and see!

“Well?” said Nugent, impatiently addressing Mr. Sebright. “What do *you* say?”

“I say nothing yet.” With that implied reproof to Nugent, he turned to me. “I understand that Miss Finch was blind—or as nearly blind as could be discovered—at a year old?”

“I have always heard so,” I replied.

“Is there any person in the house—parent, or relative, or servant—who can speak to the symptoms noticed when she was an infant?”

I rang the bell for Zillah. “Her mother is dead,” I said. “And there are reasons which prevent her father from being present to-day. Her old nurse will be able to give you all the information you want.”

Zillah appeared. Mr. Sebright put his questions.

“Were you in the house when Miss Finch was born?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Was there anything wrong with her eyes at her birth, or soon afterwards?”

“Nothing, sir.”

“How did you know?”

“I knew by seeing her take notice, sir. She used to stare at the candles, and clutch at things that were held before her, as other babies do.”

“How did you discover it, when she began to get blind?”

“In the same way, sir. There came a time, poor little thing, when her eyes looked glazed-like, and try her as we might, morning or evening, it was all the same—she noticed nothing.”

“Did the blindness come on gradually?”

“Yes, sir—bit by bit, as you may say. Slowly worse and worse one week after another. She was a little better than a year old before we clearly made it out that her sight was gone.”

“Was her father’s sight, or her mother’s sight ever affected in any way?”

“Never, sir, that I heard of.”

Mr. Sebright turned to Herr Grosse, sitting at the luncheon-table resignedly contemplating the Mayonnaise. “Do you wish to ask the nurse any questions?” he said.

Herr Grosse shrugged his shoulders, and pointed backwards with his thumb at the place in which Lucilla was sitting.

“Her case is as plain to me as twos and twos make fours. Ach Gott! what do I want with the nurse?” He turned again longingly towards the Mayonnaise. “My fine appetites is going! When shall we lonch?”

Mr. Sebright dismissed Zillah with a frigid inclination of the head. His discouraging manner made me begin to feel a little uneasy. I ventured to ask if he had arrived at a conclusion yet. “Permit me to consult with my colleague before I answer you,” said the impenetrable man. I roused Lucilla. She again inquired for Oscar. I said I supposed we should find him in the garden—and so took her out. Nugent followed us. I heard Herr Grosse whisper to him piteously, as we passed

the luncheon-table, “For the love of Heaven, come back soon, and let us lunch!” We left the ill-assorted pair to their consultation in the sitting-room.





CHAPTER THE SEVENTH.

“WHO SHALL DECIDE WHEN DOCTORS DISAGREE?”

WE had certainly not been more than ten minutes in the garden, when we were startled by an extraordinary outbreak of shouting in broken English, proceeding from the window of the sitting-room. “Hi-hi-hoi! hoi-hi! hoi-hi!” We looked up, and discovered Herr Grosse, frantically waving a huge red silk handkerchief at the window. “Lonch! lonch!” cried the German surgeon. “The consultations is done. Come-begin-begin.”

Obedient to this peremptory summons, Lucilla, Nugent, and I returned to the sitting-room. We had, as I had foreseen, found Oscar wandering alone in the garden. He

had entreated me, by a sign, not to reveal our discovery of him to Lucilla, and had hurried away to hide himself in one of the side-walks. His agitation was pitiable to see. He was totally unfit to be trusted in Lucilla's presence at that anxious moment.

When we had left the oculists together, I had sent Zillah with a little written message to Reverend Finch ; entreating him (if it was only for form's sake) to reconsider his resolution, and be present on the all-important occasion to his daughter of the delivery of the medical opinions on her case. At the bottom of the stairs (on our return), my answer was handed to me on a slip of sermon-paper. "Mr. Finch declined to submit a question of principle to any considerations dictated by mere expediency. He desired seriously to remind Madame Pratolungo of what he had already told her. In other words, he would repeat, and he would beg her to remember this time, that his Foot was down."

On re-entering the room, we found the eminent oculists seated as far apart as possible one from the other. Both gentlemen were

engaged in reading. Mr. Sebright was reading a book. Herr Grosse was reading the Mayonnaise.

I placed Lucilla close by me, and took her hand. It was as cold as ice. My poor dear trembled pitifully. For *her*, what moments of unutterable suffering were those moments of suspense, before the surgeons delivered their sentence! I pressed her little cold hand in mine, and whispered “Courage!” Truly I can say it (though I am not usually one of the sentimental sort), my heart bled for her.

“Well, gentlemen,” said Nugent, “what is the result? Are you both agreed?”

“No,” said Mr. Sebright, putting aside his book.

“No,” said Herr Grosse, ogling the Mayonnaise.

Lucilla turned her face towards me; her colour shifting and changing, her bosom rising and falling more and more rapidly. I whispered to her to compose herself. “One of them, at any rate,” I said, “thinks you will recover your sight.” She understood me, and became quieter directly. Nugent went on

with his questions, addressed to the two oculists.

“What do you differ about?” he asked.
“Will you let us hear your opinions?”

The wearisome contest of courtesy was renewed between our medical advisers. Mr. Sebright bowed to Herr Grosse: “You first.” Herr Grosse bowed to Mr. Sebright: “No—you!” My impatience broke through this cruel and ridiculous professional restraint. “Speak both together, gentlemen, if you like!” I said sharply. “Do anything, for God’s sake, but keep us in suspense. Is it, or is it not, possible to restore her sight?”

“Yes,” said Herr Grosse.

Lucilla sprang to her feet, with a cry of joy.

“No,” said Mr. Sebright.

Lucilla dropped back again into her chair, and silently laid her head on my shoulder.

“Are you agreed about the cause of her blindness?” asked Nugent.

“Cataracts is the cause,” answered Herr Grosse.

“So far, I agree,” said Mr. Sebright. “Cataract is the cause.”

"Cataracts is curable," pursued the German.

"I agree again," continued the Englishman—"with a reservation. Cataract is *sometimes* curable."

"*This* cataracts is curable!" cried Herr Grosse.

"With all possible deference," said Mr. Sebright, "I dispute that conclusion. The cataract, in Miss Finch's case, is *not* curable."

"Can you give us your reasons, sir, for saying that?" I inquired.

"My reasons are based on surgical considerations which it requires a professional training to understand," Mr. Sebright replied. "I can only tell you that I am convinced—after the most minute and careful examination—that Miss Finch's sight is irrevocably gone. Any attempt to restore it by an operation, would be, in my opinion, an unwarrantable proceeding. The young lady would not only have the operation to undergo, she would be kept secluded afterwards, for at least six weeks or two months, in a darkened room. During that time, it is needless for me to remind you that she would inevitably form the most confident

hope of her restoration to sight. Remembering this, and believing as I do that the sacrifice demanded of her would end in failure, I think it most undesirable to expose our patient to the moral consequences of a disappointment which must seriously try her. She has been resigned from childhood to her blindness. As an honest man, who feels bound to speak out and to speak strongly, I advise you not further to disturb that resignation. I declare it to be, in my opinion, certainly useless, and possibly dangerous, to allow her to be operated on for the restoration of her sight."

In those uncompromising words, the Englishman delivered his opinion.

Lucilla's hand closed fast on mine. "Cruel! cruel!" she whispered to herself angrily. I gave her a little squeeze, recommending patience--and looked in silent expectation (just as Nugent was looking too) at Herr Grosse. The German rose deliberately to his feet, and waddled to the place in which Lucilla and I were sitting together.

"Has goot Mr. Sebrights done?" he asked.

Mr. Sebright only replied by his everlasting never-changing bow.

“Goot! I have now my own word to put in,” said Herr Grosse. “It shall be one little word—no more. With my best compliments to Mr. Sebrights, I set up against what he only thinks, what I—Grosse—with these hands of mine have done. The cataracts of Miss there, is a cataracts that I have cut into before, a cataracts that I have cured before. Now look!” He suddenly wheeled round to Lucilla, tucked up his cuffs, laid a forefinger of each hand on either side of her forehead, and softly turned down her eyelids with his two big thumbs. “I pledge you my word as surgeon-optic,” he resumed, “my knife shall let the light in here. This lovable-nice girls shall be more lovable-nicer than ever. My pretty Feench must be first in her best goot health. She must next gif me my own ways with her—and then one, two, three—ping! my pretty Feench shall see!” He lifted Lucilla’s eyelids again as he said the last word—glared fiercely at her through his spectacles—gave her the loudest kiss, on the

forehead, that I ever heard given in my life—laughed till the room rang again—and returned to his post as sentinel on guard over the Mayonnaise. “Now,” cried Herr Grosse cheerfully, “the talkings is all done. Gott be thanked, the eatings may begin!”

Lucilla left her chair for the second time.

“Herr Grosse,” she said. “where are you?”

“Here, my dears!”

She crossed the room to the table at which he was sitting, already occupied in carving his favourite dish.

“Did you say you must use a knife to make me see?” she asked quite calmly.

“Yes, yes. Don’t you be frightened of that. Not much pains to bear—not much pains.”

She tapped him smartly on the shoulder with her hand.

“Get up, Herr Grosse,” she said. “If you have your knife about you, here am I—do it at once!”

Nugent started. Mr. Sebright started. Her daring amazed them both. As for me,

I am the greatest coward living, in the matter of surgical operations performed on myself or on others. Lucilla terrified me. I ran headlong across the room to her. I was even fool enough to scream.

Before I could reach her, Herr Grosse had risen, obedient to command, with a choice morsel of chicken on the end of his fork. "You charming little fools," he said, "I don't cut into cataracts in such a hurry as that. I perform but one operations on you to-day. It is this!" He unceremoniously popped the morsel of chicken into Lucilla's mouth. "Aha! Bite him well. He is nice-goot! Now then! Sit down all of you. Lonch! lonch!"

He was irresistible. We all sat down at table.

The rest of us ate. Herr Grosse gobbled. From Mayonnaise to marmalade tart. From marmalade tart back again to Mayonnaise. From Mayonnaise, forward again to ham sandwiches and blancmange; and then back once more (on the word of an honest woman) to Mayonnaise! His drinking was on the same scale as his eating. Beer, wine, brandy—

nothing came amiss to him : he mixed them all. As for the lighter elements in the feast —the almonds and raisins, the preserved ginger and the crystallised fruits, he ate them as accompaniments to everything. A dish of olives especially won his favour. He plunged both hands into it, and deposited his fists-full of olives in the pockets of his trousers. “In this ways,” he explained, “I shall trouble nobody to pass the dish—I shall have by me continually all the olives that I want.” When he could eat and drink no more, he rolled up his napkin into a ball, and became devoutly thankful. “How goot of Gott,” he remarked, “when he invented the worlds to invent eatings and drinkings too ! Ah !” sighed Herr Grosse, gently laying his outspread fingers on the pit of his stomach, “what immense happiness there is in This !”

Mr. Sebright looked at his watch.

“If there is anything more to be said on the question of the operation,” he announced, “it must be said at once. We have barely five minutes more to spare. You have heard my opinion. I hold to it.”

Herr Grosse took a pinch of snuff. "I also," he said, "hold to mine."

Lucilla turned towards the place from which Mr. Sebright had spoken.

"I am obliged to you, sir, for your opinion," she said, very quietly and firmly. "I am determined to try the operation. If it does fail, it will only leave me what I am now. If it succeeds, it gives me a new life. I will bear anything, and risk anything, on the chance that I may see."

So, she announced her decision. In those memorable words, she cleared the way for the coming Event in her life and in our lives, which it is the purpose of these pages to record.

Mr. Sebright answered her, 'in Mr. Sebright's discreet way.

"I cannot affect to be surprised at your decision," he said. "However sincerely I may regret it, I admit that it is the natural decision, in your case."

Lucilla addressed herself next to Herr Grosse.

"Choose your own day," she said. "The

sooner, the better. To-morrow, if you can."

"Answer me one little thing, Miss," rejoined the German, with a sudden gravity of tone and manner which was quite new in our experience of him. "Do you mean what you say?"

She answered him gravely on her side. "I mean what I say."

"Goot. There is times, my lofe, to be funny. There is also times to be grave. It is grave-times now. I have my last word to say to you before I go."

With his wild black eyes staring through his owlish spectacles at Lucilla's face, speaking earnestly in his strange broken English, he now impressed on his patient the necessity of gravely considering, and preparing for, the operation which he had undertaken to perform.

I was greatly relieved by the tone he took with her. He spoke with authority: she would be obliged to listen to *him*.

In the first place, he warned Lucilla, if the operation failed, that there would be no possibility of returning to it, and trying it again.

Once done, be the results what they might, it was done for good.

In the second place, before he would consent to operate, he must insist on certain conditions, essential to success, being rigidly complied with, on the part of the patient and her friends. Mr. Sebright had by no means exaggerated the length of the time of trial which would follow the operation, in the darkened room. Under no circumstances could she hope to have her eyes uncovered, even for a few moments, to the light, after a shorter interval than six weeks. During the whole of that time, and probably during another six weeks to follow, it was absolutely necessary that she should be kept in such a state of health as would assist her, constitutionally, in her gradual progress towards complete restoration of sight. If body and mind both were not preserved in their best and steadiest condition, all that his skill could do might be done in vain. Nothing to excite or to agitate her, must be allowed to find its way into the quiet daily routine of her life, until her medical attendant was satisfied that her sight was safe.

The success of Herr Grosse's professional career had been due, in no small degree, to his rigid enforcement of these rules : founded on his own experience of the influence which a patient's general health, moral as well as physical, exercised on that patient's chance of profiting under an operation—more especially under an operation on an organ so delicate as the organ of sight.

Having spoken to this effect, he appealed to Lucilla's own good sense to recognise the necessity of taking time to consider her decision, and to consult on it with relatives and friends. In plain words, for at least three months the family arrangements must be so shaped, as to enable the surgeon in attendance on her to hold the absolute power of regulating her life, and of deciding on any changes introduced into it. When she and the members of her family circle were sure of being able to comply with these conditions, Lucilla had only to write to him at his hotel in London. On the next day he would undertake to be at Dimchurch. And then and there (if he was satisfied with the state of her health

at the time), he would perform the operation.

After pledging himself in those terms, Herr Grosse puffed out his remaining breath in one deep guttural “Hah!”—and got briskly on his short legs. At the same moment, Zillah knocked at the door, and announced that the chaise was waiting for the two gentlemen at the rectory-gate.

Mr. Sebright rose—in some doubt, apparently, whether his colleague had done talking. “Don’t let me hurry you,” he said. “I have business in London; and I must positively catch the next train.”

“Soh! I have my business in London, too,” answered his brother-oculist—“the business of pleasure.” (Mr. Sebright looked scandalised at the frankness of this confession, coming from a professional man). “I am so passion-fond of musics,” Herr Grosse went on—“I want to be in goot times for the opera. Ach Gott! musics is expensive in England! I climb to the gallery, and pay my five silver shillingses even there. For five copper pences, in my own country, I can get the same thing

—only better done. From the deep bottoms of my heart," proceeded this curious man, taking a cordial leave of me, "I thank you, dear madam, for the Mayonnaise. When I come again, I pray you more of that lofely dish." He turned to Lucilla, and popped his thumb on her eyelids for the last time at parting. "My sweet-Feench, remember what your surgeon-optic has said to you. I shall let the light in here—but in my own way, at my own time. Pretty lofe! Ah, how infinitely much prettier she will be, when she can see!" He took Lucilla's hand, and put it sentimentally inside the collar of his waistcoat, over the region of the heart; laying his other hand upon it as if he was keeping it warm. In this tender attitude, he blew a prodigious sigh; recovered himself, with a shake of his shock-head; winked at me through his spectacles, and waddled out after Mr. Sebright, who was already at the bottom of the stairs. Who would have guessed that this man held the key which was to open for my blind Lucilla the gates of a new life!



CHAPTER THE EIGHTH.

ALAS FOR THE MARRIAGE !

WE were left together; Nugent having accompanied the two oculists to the garden-gate.

Now that we were alone, Oscar's absence could hardly fail to attract Lucilla's attention. Just as she was referring to him, in terms which made it no easy task for me to quiet her successfully, we were interrupted by the screams of the baby, ascending from the garden below. I ran to the window, and looked out.

Mrs. Finch had actually effected her desperate purpose of waylaying the two surgeons in the interests of "baby's eyes." There she was, in a skirt and a shawl—with her novel

dropped in one part of the lawn, and her handkerchief in the other—pursuing the oculists on their way to the chaise. Reckless of appearances, Herr Grosse had taken to his heels. He was retreating from the screeching infant (with his fingers stuffed into his ears), as fast as his short legs would let him. Nugent was ahead of him, hurrying on to open the garden-gate. Respectable Mr. Sebright (professionally incapable of running) brought up the rear. At short intervals, Mrs. Finch, close on his heels, held up the baby for inspection. At short intervals, Mr. Sebright held up his hands in polite protest. Nugent, roaring with laughter, threw open the garden-gate. Herr Grosse rushed through the opening, and disappeared. Mr. Sebright followed Herr Grosse; and Mrs. Finch attempted to follow Mr. Sebright—when a new personage appeared on the scene. Startled in the sanctuary of his study by the noise, the rector himself strutted into the garden, and brought his wife to a sudden standstill, by inquiring in his deepest bass notes, “What does this unseemly disturbance mean?”

The chaise drove off; and Nugent closed the garden-gate.

Some words, inaudible to my ears, passed between Nugent and the rector—referring, as I could only suppose, to the visit of the two departing surgeons. After awhile, Mr. Finch turned away (to all appearance offended by something which had been said to him), and addressed himself to Oscar, who now reappeared on the lawn; having evidently only waited to show himself, until the chaise drove away. The rector paternally took his arm; and, beckoning to his wife with the other hand, took Mrs. Finch's arm next. Majestically marching back to the house between the two, Reverend Finch asserted himself and his authority alternately, now to Oscar and now to his wife. His big booming voice reached my ears distinctly, accompanied in sharp discord by the last wailings of the exhausted child.

In these terrible words the Pope of Dimchurch began:—

“Oscar! you are to understand distinctly, if you please, that I maintain my protest

against this impious attempt to meddle with my afflicted daughter's sight.—Mrs. Finch ! *you* are to understand that I excuse your unseemly pursuit of two strange surgeons, in consideration of the state that I find you in at this moment. After your last confinement but eight you became, I remember, hysterically irresponsible. Hold your tongue. You are hysterically irresponsible now.—Oscar ! I decline, in justice to myself, to be present at any discussion which may follow the visit of these two professional persons. But I am not averse to advising you for your own good. My Foot is down. Put *your* foot down too.—Mrs. Finch ! how long is it since you ate last ? Two hours ? Are you sure it is two hours ? Very good. You require a sedative application. I order you, medically, to get into a warm bath, and stay there till I come to you.—Oscar ! you are deficient, my good fellow, in moral weight. Endeavour to oppose yourself resolutely to any scheme, on the part of my unhappy daughter or of those who advise her, which involves more expenditure of money in fees, and new appearances

of professional persons.—Mrs. Finch! the temperature is to be ninety-eight, and the position partially recumbent.—Oscar! I authorise you (if you can't stop it in any other way) to throw My moral weight into the scale. You are free to say 'I oppose This, with Mr. Finch's approval: I am, so to speak, backed by Mr. Finch.—Mrs. Finch! I wish you to understand the object of the bath. Hold your tongue. The object is to produce a gentle action on your skin. One of the women is to keep her eye on your forehead. The instant she perceives an appearance of moisture, she is to run for me.—Oscar! you will let me know at what decision they arrive, up-stairs in my daughter's room. Not after they have merely heard what *you* have to say, but after My Moral Weight has been thrown into the scale.—Mrs. Finch! on leaving the bath, I shall have you only lightly clothed. I forbid, with a view to your head, all compression, whether of stays or strings, round the waist. I forbid garters—with the same object. You will abstain from tea and talking. You will lie, loose, on your back. You will—”

What else this unhappy woman was to do, I failed to hear. Mr. Finch disappeared with her, round the corner of the house. Oscar waited at the door of our side of the rectory, until Nugent joined him, on their way back to the sitting-room in which we were expecting their return.

After an interval of a few minutes, the brothers appeared.

Throughout the whole of the time during which the surgeons had been in the house, I had noticed that Nugent persisted in keeping himself scrupulously in the background. Having assumed the responsibility of putting the serious question of Lucilla's sight scientifically to the test, he appeared to be resolved to pause there, and to interfere no further in the affair after it had passed its first stage. And now again, when we were met in our little committee to discuss, and possibly to combat, Lucilla's resolution to proceed to extremities, he once more refrained from interfering actively with the matter in hand.

"I have brought Oscar back with me," he said to Lucilla; "and I have told him how widely the two oculists differ in opinion on your case. He knows also that you have decided on being guided by the more favourable view taken by Herr Grosse—and he knows no more."

There he stopped abruptly, and seated himself apart from us, at the lower end of the room.

Lucilla instantly appealed to Oscar to explain his conduct.

"Why have you kept out of the way?" she asked. "Why have you not been with me, at the most important moment of my life?"

"Because I felt your anxious position too keenly," Oscar answered. "Don't think me inconsiderate towards you, Lucilla. If I had not kept away, I might not have been able to control myself."

I thought that reply far too dexterous to have come from Oscar on the spur of the moment. Besides, he looked at his brother when he said the last words. It seemed more than likely—short as the interval had

been before they appeared in the sitting-room —that Nugent had been advising Oscar, and had been telling him what to say.

Lucilla received his excuses with the readiest grace and kindness.

“Mr. Sebright tells me, Oscar, that my sight is hopelessly gone,” she said. “Herr Grosse answers for it that an operation will make me see. Need I tell you which of the two I believe in? If I could have had my own way, Herr Grosse should have operated on my eyes, before he went back to London.”

“Did he refuse?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

Lucilla told him of the reasons which the German oculist had stated as unanswerable reasons for delay. Oscar listened attentively, and looked at his brother again, before he replied.

“As I understand it,” he said, “if you decide on risking the operation at once, you decide on undergoing six weeks’ imprisonment in a darkened room, and on placing yourself entirely at the surgeon’s disposal for

six weeks more, after that. Have you considered, Lucilla, that this means putting off our marriage *again*, for at least three months?"

"If you were in my place, Oscar, you would let nothing, not even your marriage, stand in the way of your restoration to sight. Don't ask me to consider, love. I can consider nothing but the prospect of seeing You!"

That fearlessly frank confession silenced him. He happened to be sitting opposite to the glass, so that he could see his face. The poor wretch abruptly moved his chair, so as to turn his back on it.

I looked at Nugent, and surprised him trying to catch his brother's eye. Prompted by him, as I could now no longer doubt, Oscar had laid his finger on a certain domestic difficulty which I had had in my mind, from the moment when the question of the operation had been first agitated among us.

(The marriage of Oscar and Lucilla—it is here necessary to explain—had encountered another obstacle, and undergone a new delay, in consequence of the dangerous illness of

Lucilla's aunt. Miss Batchford, formally invited to the ceremony as a matter of course, had most considerately sent a message begging that the marriage might not be deferred on her account. Lucilla, however, had refused to allow her wedding to be celebrated, while the woman who had been a second mother to her, lay at the point of death. The rector having an eye to rich Miss Batchford's money—not for himself (Miss B. detested him), but for Lucilla—had supported his daughter's decision; and Oscar had been compelled to submit. These domestic events had taken place about three weeks since; and we were now in receipt of news which not only assured us of the old lady's recovery, but informed us also that she would be well enough to make one of the wedding party in a fortnight's time. The bride's dress was in the house; the bride's father was ready to officiate—and here, like a fatality, was the question of the operation unexpectedly starting up, and threatening another delay yet, for a period which could not possibly be shorter than a period of three months! Add to this, if you

please, a new element of embarrassment as follows. Supposing Lucilla to persist in her resolution, and Oscar to persist in concealing from her the personal change in him produced by the medical treatment of the fits, what would happen? Nothing less than this. Lucilla, if the operation succeeded, would find out for herself—before instead of after her marriage—the deception that had been practised on her. And how she might resent that deception, thus discovered, the cleverest person among us could not pretend to foresee. There was our situation, as we sat in domestic parliament assembled, when the surgeons had left us!)

Finding it impossible to attract his brother's attention, Nugent had no alternative but to interfere actively for the first time.

“Let me suggest, Lucilla,” he said, “that it is your duty to look at the other side of the question, before you make up your mind. In the first place, it is surely hard on Oscar to postpone the wedding-day again. In the second place, clever as he is, Herr Grosse is not infallible. It is just possible that the

operation may fail, and that you may find you have put off your marriage for three months, to no purpose. Do think of it! If you defer the operation on your eyes till after your marriage, you conciliate all interests, and you only delay by a month or so the time when you may see."

Lucilla impatiently shook her head.

"If you were blind," she answered, "you would not willingly delay by a single hour the time when you might see. You ask me to think of it. I ask *you* to think of the years I have lost. I ask *you* to think of the exquisite happiness I shall feel, when Oscar and I are standing at the altar, if I can *see* the husband to whom I am giving myself for life! Put it off for a month? You might as well ask me to die for a month. It is like death to be sitting here blind, and to know that a man is within a few hours' reach of me who can give me my sight! I tell you all plainly, if you go on opposing me in this, I don't answer for myself. If Herr Grosse is not recalled to Dimchurch before the end of the week—I am my own mistress; I will go to him in London!"

Both the brothers looked at me.

“Have you nothing to say, Madame Pratolungo?” asked Nugent.

Oscar was too painfully agitated to speak. He softly crossed to my chair; and, kneeling by me, put my hand entreatingly to his lips.

You may consider me a heartless woman if you will. I remained entirely unmoved even by this. Lucilla’s interests and my interests, you will observe, were now one. I had resolved, from the first, that she should not be married in ignorance of which was the man who was disfigured by the blue face. If she took the course which would enable her to make that discovery for herself, at the right time, she would spare me the performance of a very painful and ungracious duty—and she would marry, as I was determined she should marry, with a full knowledge of the truth. In this position of affairs, it was no business of mine to join the twin-brothers in trying to make her alter her resolution. On the contrary, it was my business to confirm her in it.

“I can’t see that I have any right to interfere,” I said. “In Lucilla’s place—after one

and twenty years of blindness—I too should sacrifice every other consideration to the consideration of recovering my sight."

Oscar instantly rose, offended with me, and walked away to the window. Lucilla's face brightened gratefully. "Ah!" she said, "*you* understand me!" Nugent, in his turn, left his chair. He had confidently calculated, in his brother's interests, on Lucilla's marriage preceding the recovery of Lucilla's sight. That calculation was completely baffled. The marriage would now depend on the state of Lucilla's feelings, after she had penetrated the truth for herself. I saw Nugent's face darken, as he walked to the door.

"Madame Pratolungo," he said, "You may, one day, regret the course that you have just taken. Do as you please, Lucilla—I have no more to say."

He left the room, with a quiet submission to circumstances which became him admirably. Now, as always, it was impossible not to compare him advantageously with his vacillating brother. Oscar turned round at the window, apparently with the idea of fol-

lowing Nugent out. At the first step, he checked himself. There was a last effort still left to make. Reverend Finch's "moral weight" had not been thrown into the scale yet.

"There is one thing more, Lucilla," he said, "which you ought to know before you decide. I have seen your father. He desires me to tell you that he is strongly opposed to the experiment which you are determined to try."

Lucilla sighed wearily. "It is not the first time that I find my father failing to sympathise with me," she said. "I am distressed—but not surprised. It is *you* who surprise me!" she added, suddenly raising her voice. "You, who love me, are not one with me, when I am standing on the brink of a new life. Good Heavens! are my interests not your interests in this? Is it not worth your while to wait till I can *look at you* when I vow before God to love, honour, and obey you? Do you understand him?" she asked, appealing abruptly to me. "Why does he try to start difficulties? why is he not as eager about it as I am?"

I turned to Oscar. Now was the time for him to fall at her feet, and own it ! Here was the golden opportunity that might never come again. I signed to him impatiently to take it. He tried to take it—let me do him the justice now, which I failed to do him at the time—he tried to take it. He advanced towards her ; he struggled with himself ; he said, “ There is a motive for my conduct, Lucilla——” and stopped. His breath failed him ; he struggled again ; he forced out a word or two more : “ A motive,” he went on, “ which I have been afraid to confess——” he paused again, with the perspiration pouring over his livid face.

Lucilla’s patience failed her. “ What is your motive ?” she asked sharply.

The tone in which she spoke broke down his last reserves of resolution. He turned his head suddenly so as not to see her. At the final moment—miserable, miserable man ! —at the final moment, he took refuge in an excuse.

“ I don’t believe in Herr Grosse,” he said faintly, “ as you believe in him.”

Lucilla rose, bitterly disappointed, and

opened the door that led into her own room.

"If it had been you who were blind," she answered, "*your* belief would have been *my* belief, and *your* hope *my* hope. It seems I have expected too much from you. Live and learn! live and learn!"

She went into her room, and closed the door on us. I could bear it no longer. I got up, with the firm resolution in me to follow her, and say the words which he had failed to say for himself. My hand was on the door, when I was suddenly pulled back from it by Oscar. I turned, and faced him in silence.

"No!" he said, with his eyes fixed on mine, and his hand still on my arm. "If I don't tell her, nobody shall tell her for me."

"She shall be deceived no longer—she must, and shall, hear it," I answered. "Let me go!"

"You have given me your promise to wait for my leave before you open your lips. I forbid you to open your lips."

I snapped the fingers of my hand that was

free in his face. “ *That* for my promise !” I said. “ Your contemptible weakness is putting her happiness in peril as well as yours.” I turned my head towards the door, and called to her. “ Lucilla !”

His hand closed fast on my arm. Some lurking devil in him that I had never seen yet, leapt up and looked at me out of his eyes.

“ Tell her,” he whispered savagely between his teeth ; “ and I will contradict you to your face ! If you are desperate, I am desperate too. I don’t care what meanness I am guilty of ! I will deny it on my honour ; I will deny it on my oath. You heard what she said about you at Browndown. She will believe *me* before *you*.”

Lucilla opened her door, and stood waiting on the threshold.

“ What is it ?” she asked quietly.

A moment’s glance at Oscar warned me that he would do what he had threatened, if I persisted in my resolution. The desperation of a weak man is, of all desperations, the most unscrupulous and the most unmanageable

—when it is once roused. Angry as I was, I shrank from degrading him, as I must now have degraded him, if I matched my obstinacy against his. In mercy to both of them, I gave way.

“I may be going out, my dear, before it gets dark,” I said to Lucilla. “Can I do anything for you in the village?”

“Yes,” she said, “if you will wait a little, you can take a letter for me to the post.”

She went back into her room, and closed the door.

I neither looked at Oscar, nor spoke to him, when we were alone again. He was the first who broke the silence.

“You have remembered your promise to me,” he said. “You have done well.”

“I have nothing more to say to you,” I answered. “I shall go to my own room.”

His eyes followed me uneasily as I walked to the door.

“I shall speak to her,” he muttered doggedly, “at my own time.”

A wise woman would not have allowed him to irritate her into saying another word.

Alas! I am not a wise woman—that is to say, not always.

“Your own time?” I repeated with the whole force of my contempt. “If you don’t own the truth to her before the German surgeon comes back, your time will have gone by for ever. He has told us in the plainest terms—when once the operation is performed, nothing must be said to agitate or distress her, for months afterwards. The preservation of her tranquillity is the condition of the recovery of her sight. You will soon have an excuse for your silence, Mr. Oscar Dubourg!”

The tone in which I said those last words stung him to some purpose.

“Spare your sneers, you heartless French-woman!” he broke out angrily. “I don’t care how I stand in *your* estimation. Lucilla loves me. Nugent feels for me.”

My vile temper instantly hit on the most merciless answer that I could make to him in return.

“Ah, poor Lucilla!” I said. “What a much happier prospect hers might have been!

What a thousand, thousand pities it is that she is not going to marry your brother, instead of marrying *you*!"

He winced under that reply, as if I had cut him with a knife. His head dropped on his breast. He started back from me like a beaten dog—and suddenly and silently left the room.

I had not been a minute by myself, before my anger cooled. I tried to keep it hot; I tried to remember that he had aspersed my nation in calling me a "heartless French-woman." No! it was not to be done. In spite of myself, I repented what I had said to him.

In a moment more, I was out on the stairs to try if I could overtake him.

I was too late. I heard the garden-gate bang, before I was out of the house. Twice I approached the gate to follow him. And twice I drew back, in the fear of making bad worse. It ended in my returning to the sitting-room, very seriously dissatisfied with myself.

The first welcome interruption to my soli-

tude came—not from Lucilla—but from the old nurse. Zillah appeared with a letter for me. I left that moment at the rectory by the servant from Browndown. The direction was in Oscar's handwriting. I opened the envelope, and read these words:—

“MADAME PRATOLUNGO,—You have distressed and pained me more than I can say. There are faults, and serious ones, on my side, I know. I heartily beg your pardon for anything that I may have said or done to offend you. I cannot submit to your hard verdict on me. If you knew how I adore Lucilla, you would make allowances for me—you would understand me better than you do. I cannot get your last cruel words out of my ears. I cannot meet you again without some explanation of them. You stabbed me to the heart, when you said this evening that it would be a happier prospect for Lucilla if she had been going to marry my brother instead of marrying me. I hope you did not really mean that? Will you please write and tell me whether you did or not?

“OSCAR.”

Write and tell him? It was absurd enough—when we were within a few minutes' walk of each other—that Oscar should prefer the cold formality of a letter, to the friendly ease of a personal interview. Why could he not have called, and spoken to me? We

should have made it up together far more comfortably in that way—and in half the time. At any rate, I determined to go to Browndown, and be good friends again, vivâ-voce, with this poor, weak, well-meaning, ill-judging boy. Was it not monstrous to have attached serious meaning to what Oscar had said when he was in a panic of nervous terror! His tone of writing so keenly distressed me that I resented his letter on that very account. It was one of the chilly evenings of an English June. A small fire was burning in the grate. I crumpled up the letter, and threw it, as I supposed, into the fire. (After-events showed that I only threw it into a corner of the fender instead.) Then, I put on my hat, without stopping to think of Lucilla, or of what she was writing for the post, and ran off to Browndown.

Where do you think I found him? Locked up in his own room! His insane shyness—it was really nothing less—made him shrink from that very personal explanation which (with such a temperament as mine) was the only possible explanation under the circum-

stances. I had to threaten him with forcing his door, before I could get him to show himself, and take my hand.

Once face to face with him, I soon set things right. I really believe he had been half mad with his own self-imposed troubles, when he had declared he would give me the lie at the door of Lucilla's room.

It is needless to dwell on what took place between us. I shall only say here that I had serious reason, at a later time—as you will soon see—to regret not having humoured Oscar's request that I should reconcile myself to him by writing, instead of by word of mouth. If I had only placed on record, in pen and ink, what I actually said in the way of making atonement to him, I might have spared some suffering to myself and to others. As it was, the only proof that I had absolved myself in his estimation consisted in his cordially shaking hands with me at the door, when I left him.

“Did you meet Nugent?” he asked, as he walked with me across the enclosure in front of the house.

I had gone to Browndown by a short cut at the back of the garden, instead of going through the village. Having mentioned this, I asked if Nugent had returned to the rectory.

“He went back to see you,” said Oscar.

“Why?”

“Only his usual kindness. He takes your views of things. He laughed when he heard I had sent a letter to you, and he ran off (dear fellow!) to see you on my behalf. You must have met him, if you had come here by the village.”

On getting back to the rectory, I questioned Zillah. Nugent, in my absence, had run up into the sitting-room; had waited there a few minutes alone, on the chance of my return; had got tired of waiting, and had gone away again. I inquired about Lucilla next. A few minutes after Nugent had gone, she had left her room, and she too had asked for me. Hearing that I was not to be found in the house, she had given Zillah a letter to post—and had then returned to her bed-chamber.

I happened to be standing by the hearth

looking into the dying fire, while the nurse was speaking. Not a vestige of Oscar's letter to me (as I now well remember) was to be seen. In my position, the plain conclusion was that I had really done what I supposed myself to have done—that is to say, thrown the letter into the flames.

Entering Lucilla's room, soon afterwards, to make my apologies for having forgotten to wait and take her letter to the post, I found her, weary enough after the events of the day, getting ready for bed.

"I don't wonder at your being tired of waiting for me," she said. "Writing is long, long work for *me*. But this was a letter which I felt bound to write myself, if I could. Can you guess who I am corresponding with? It is done, my dear! I have written to Herr Grosse!"

"Already!"

"What is there to wait for? What is there left to determine on? I have told Herr Grosse that our family consultation is over, and that I am entirely at his disposal for any length of time he may think right. And I

warn him, if he attempts to put it off, that he will be only forcing on me the inconvenience of going to him in London. I have expressed that part of my letter strongly—I can tell you! He will get it to-morrow, by the afternoon post. And the next day—if he is a man of his word—he will be here."

"Oh, Lucilla! not to operate on your eyes?"

"Yes—to operate on my eyes!"





CHAPTER THE NINTH.

THE DAY BETWEEN.

THE interval-day before the second appearance of Herr Grosse, and the experiment on Lucilla's sight that was to follow it, was marked by two incidents which ought to be noticed in this place.

The first incident was the arrival, early in the morning, of another letter addressed to me privately by Oscar Dubourg. Like many other shy people, he had a perfect mania, where any embarrassing circumstances were concerned, for explaining himself, with difficulty, by means of his pen, in preference to explaining himself, with ease, by means of his tongue.

Oscar's present communication informed me that he had left us for London by the first morning train, and that his object in taking this sudden journey was—to state his present position towards Lucilla to a gentleman especially conversant with the peculiarities of blind people. In plain words, he had resolved on applying to Mr. Sebright for advice.

“I like Mr. Sebright” (Oscar wrote) “as cordially as I detest Herr Grosse. The short conversation I had with him has left me with the pleasantest impression of his delicacy and his kindness. If I freely reveal to this skilful surgeon the sad situation in which I am placed, I believe his experience will throw an entirely new light on the present state of Lucilla's mind, and on the changes which we may expect to see produced in her, if she really does recover her sight. The result may be of incalculable benefit in teaching me how I may own the truth, most harmlessly to her, as well as to myself. Pray don't suppose I undervalue your advice. I only want to be doubly fortified, before I risk my confession, by the advice of a scientific man.”

All this I took to mean, in plain English, that vacillating Oscar wanted to quiet his conscience by gaining time, and that his absurd idea of consulting Mr. Sebright was nothing less than a new and plausible excuse for putting off the evil day. His letter ended by pledging me to secrecy, and by entreating me so to manage matters as to grant him a private interview on his return to Dimchurch by the evening train.

I confess I felt some curiosity as to what would come of the proposed consultation between unready Oscar and precise Mr. Sebright—and I accordingly arranged to take my walk alone, towards eight o'clock that evening, on the road that led to the distant railway station.

The second incident of the day may be described as a confidential conversation between Lucilla and myself, on the subject which now equally absorbed us both—the momentous subject of her restoration to the blessing of sight.

She joined me at the breakfast-table with

her ready distrust newly excited, poor thing, by Oscar. He had accounted to her for his journey to London by putting forward the commonplace excuse of "business." She instantly suspected (knowing how he felt about it) that he was secretly bent on interfering with the performance of the operation by Herr Grosse. I contrived to compose the anxiety thus aroused in her mind, by informing her, on Oscar's own authority, that he personally disliked and distrusted the German oculist. "Make your mind easy," I said. "I answer for his not venturing near Herr Grosse."

A long silence between us followed those words. When Lucilla next referred to Oscar in connection with the coming operation, the depressed state of her spirits seemed to have quite altered her view of her own prospects. She, of all the people in the world, now spoke in disparagement of the blessing conferred on the blind by the recovery of their sight !

"Do you know one thing?" she said. "If I had not been going to be married to Oscar, I doubt if I should have cared to put any

oculist, native or foreign, to the trouble of coming to Dimchurch."

"I don't think I understand you," I answered. "You cannot surely mean to say that you would not have been glad, under any circumstances, to recover your sight?"

"That is just what I do mean to say."

"What! you, who have written to Grosse to hurry the operation, don't care to see?"

"I only care to see Oscar. And, what is more, I only care to see *him* because I am in love with him. But for that, I really don't feel as if it would give me any particular pleasure to use my eyes. I have been blind so long, I have learnt to do without them."

"And yet, you looked perfectly entranced when Nugent first set you doubting whether you were blind for life?"

"Nugent took me by surprise," she answered; "Nugent startled me out of my senses. I have had time to think since; I am not carried away by the enthusiasm of the moment, now. You people who can see attach such an absurd importance to your eyes! I set my touch, my dear, against your eyes, as

much the most trustworthy, and much the most intelligent sense of the two. If Oscar was not, as I have said, the uppermost feeling with me, shall I tell you what I should have infinitely preferred to recovering my sight—supposing it could have been done?" She shook her head with a comic resignation to circumstances. "Unfortunately, it can't be done!"

"What can't be done?"

She suddenly held out both her arms over the breakfast-table.

"The stretching out of *these* to an enormous and unheard-of length. That is what I should have liked!" she answered. "I could find out better what was going on at a distance with my hands, than you could with your eyes and your telescopes. What doubts I might set at rest for instance about the planetary system, among the people who can see, if I could only stretch out far enough to touch the stars."

"This is talking sheer nonsense, Lucilla!"

"Is it? Just tell me which knows best in the dark—my touch or your eyes? Who has got a sense that she can always trust to serve

her equally well through the whole four-and-twenty hours? You or me? But for Oscar—to speak in sober earnest, this time—I tell you I would much rather perfect the sense in me that I have already got, than have a sense given to me that I have *not* got. Until I knew Oscar, I don't think I ever honestly envied any of you the use of your eyes."

"You astonish me, Lucilla!"

She rattled her teaspoon impatiently in her empty cup.

"Can you always trust your eyes, even in broad daylight?" she burst out. "How often do they deceive you, in the simplest things? What did I hear you all disputing about the other day in the garden? You were looking at some view?"

"Yes—at the view down the alley of trees at the other end of the churchyard wall."

"Some object in the alley had attracted general notice—had it not?"

"Yes—an object at the further end of it."

"I heard you up here. You all differed in opinion, in spite of your wonderful eyes. My father said it moved. You said it stood still.

Oscar said it was a man. Mrs. Finch said it was a calf. Nugent ran off, and examined this amazing object at close quarters. And what did it turn out to be? A stump of an old tree blown across the road in the night! Why am I to envy people the possession of a sense which plays them such tricks as that? No! no! Herr Grosse is going to 'cut into my cataracts,' as he calls it—because I am going to be married to a man I love; and I fancy, like a fool, I may love him better still, if I can see him. I may be quite wrong," she added archly. "It may end in my not loving him half as well as I do now!"

I thought of Oscar's face, and felt a sickening fear that she might be speaking far more seriously than she suspected. I tried to change the subject. No! Her imaginative nature had found its way into a new region of speculation before I could open my lips.

"I associate light," she said thoughtfully, "with all that is beautiful and heavenly—and dark with all that is vile and horrible and devilish. I wonder how light and dark will look to me when I see?"

“I believe they will astonish you,” I answered, “by being entirely unlike what you fancy them to be now.”

She started. I had alarmed her without intending it.

“Will Oscar’s face be utterly unlike what I fancy it to be now?” she asked, in suddenly altered tones. “Do you mean to say that I have not had the right image of him in my mind all this time?”

I tried again to draw her off to another topic. What more could I do—with my tongue tied by the German’s warning to us not to agitate her, in the face of the operation to be performed on the next day?

It was quite useless. She went on, as before, without heeding me.

“Have I no means of judging rightly what Oscar is like?” she said. “I touch my own face; I know how long it is, and how broad it is; I know how big the different features are, and where they are. And then I touch Oscar, and compare his face with my knowledge of my own face. Not a single detail escapes me. I see him in my mind as plainly

as you see me across this table. Do you mean to say, when I see him with my eyes, that I shall discover something perfectly new to me? I don't believe it!" She started up impatiently, and took a turn in the room. "Oh!" she exclaimed, with a stamp of her foot, "why can't I take laudanum enough, or chloroform enough to kill me for the next six weeks—and then come to life again when the German takes the bandage off my eyes!" She sat down once more, and drifted all on a sudden into a question of pure morality. "Tell me this," she said. "Is the greatest virtue, the virtue which it is most difficult to practise?"

"I suppose so," I answered.

She drummed with both hands on the table, petulantly, viciously, as hard as she could.

"Then, Madame Pratolungo," she said, "the greatest of all the virtues is—Patience. Oh, my friend, how I hate the greatest of all the virtues at this moment!"

That ended it—there the conversation found its way into other topics at last.

Thinking afterwards of the new side of her mind which Lucilla had shown to me, I derived one consolation from what had passed at the breakfast-table. If Mr. Sebright proved to be right, and if the operation failed after all, I had Lucilla's word for it that blindness, of itself, is not the terrible affliction to the blind which the rest of us fancy it to be—because we can see.

Towards half-past seven in the evening, I went out alone, as I had planned, to meet Oscar on his return from London.

At a long straight stretch of the road, I saw him advancing towards me. He was walking more rapidly than usual, and singing as he walked. Even through its livid discolouration, the poor fellow's face looked radiant with happiness as he came nearer. He waved his walking-stick exultingly in the air. "Good news!" he called out at the top of his voice. "Mr. Sebright has made me a happy man again!" I had never before seen him so like Nugent in manner, as I now saw him when we met and he shook hands with me.

“Tell me all about it,” I said.

He gave me his arm; and, talking all the way, we walked back slowly to Dimchurch.

“In the first place,” he began, “Mr. Sebright holds to his own opinion more firmly than ever. He feels absolutely certain that the operation will fail.”

“Is that your good news?” I asked reproachfully.

“No,” he said. “Though, mind, I own to my shame there was a time when I almost hoped it would fail. Mr. Sebright has put me in a better frame of mind. I have little or nothing to dread from the success of the operation—if, by any extraordinary chance, it should succeed. I remind you of Mr. Sebright’s opinion merely to give you a right idea of the tone which he took with me at starting. He only consented under protest to contemplate the event which Lucilla and Herr Grosse consider to be a certainty. ‘If the statement of your position requires it,’ he said, ‘I will admit that it is barely possible she may be able to see you two months hence.

Now begin.' I began by informing him of my marriage engagement."

"Shall I tell you how Mr. Sebright received the information?" I said. "He held his tongue, and made you a bow."

Oscar laughed.

"Quite true!" he answered. "I told him next of Lucilla's extraordinary antipathy to dark people, and dark shades of colour of all kinds. Can you guess what he said to me when I had done?"

I owned that my observation of Mr. Sebright's character did not extend to guessing that.

"He said it was a common antipathy in his experience of the blind. It was one among the many strange influences exercised by blindness on the mind. 'The physical affliction has its mysterious moral influence,' he said. 'We can observe it, but we can't explain it. The special antipathy which you mention, is an incurable antipathy, except on one condition—the recovery of the sight.' There he stopped. I entreated him to go on. No! He declined to go on until I had

finished what I had to say to him first. I had my confession still to make to him—and I made it."

" You concealed nothing?"

" Nothing. I laid my weakness bare before him. I told him that Lucilla was still firmly convinced that Nugent's was the discoloured face, instead of mine. And then I put the question—What am I to do?"

" And how did he reply?"

" In these words.—' If you ask me what you are to do, in the event of her remaining blind (which I tell you again *will* be the event), I decline to advise you. Your own conscience and your own sense of honour must decide the question. On the other hand, if you ask me what you are to do, in the event of her recovering her sight, I can answer you unreservedly in the plainest terms. 'Leave things as they are; and wait till she sees.' Those were his own words. Oh, the load that they took off my mind! I made him repeat them—I declare I was almost afraid to trust the evidence of my own ears."

I understood the motive of Oscar's good spirits, better than I understood the motive of Mr. Sebright's advice. "Did he give his reasons?" I asked.

"You shall hear his reasons directly. He insisted on first satisfying himself that I thoroughly understood my position at that moment. 'The prime condition of success, as Herr Grosse has told you,' he said, 'is the perfect tranquillity of the patient. If you make your confession to the young lady when you get back to-night to Dimchurch, you throw her into a state of excitement which will render it impossible for my German colleague to operate on her to-morrow. If you defer your confession, the medical necessities of the case force you to be silent, until the professional attendance of the oculist has ceased. There is your position! My advice to you is to adopt the last alternative. Wait (and make the other persons in the secret wait) until the result of the operation has declared itself.' There I stopped him. 'Do you mean that I am to be present, on the first occasion when she is able to use her eyes?'

I asked. ‘ Am I to let her see me, without a word beforehand to prepare her for the colour of my face ? ’ ”

We were now getting to the interesting part of it. You English people, when you are out walking and are carrying on a conversation with a friend, never come to a standstill at the points of interest. We foreigners, on the other hand, invariably stop. I surprised Oscar by suddenly pulling him up in the middle of the road.

“ What is the matter ? ” he asked.

“ Go on ! ” I said impatiently.

“ I can’t go on,” he rejoined. “ You’re holding me.”

I held him tighter than ever, and ordered him more resolutely than ever to go on. Oscar resigned himself to a halt (foreign fashion) on the high road.

“ Mr. Sebright met my question by putting a question on his side,” he resumed. “ He asked me how I proposed to prepare her for the colour of my face.”

“ And what did you tell him ? ”

“ I said I had planned to make an excuse

for leaving Dimchurch—and, once away, to prepare her by writing for what she might expect to see when I returned."

"What did he say to that?"

"He wouldn't hear of it. He said, 'I strongly recommend you to be present on the first occasion when she is capable (if she ever *is* capable) of using her sight. I attach the greatest importance to her being able to correct the hideous and absurd image now in her mind of a face like yours, by seeing you as you really are at the earliest available opportunity.'"

We were just walking on again, when certain words in that last sentence startled me. I stopped short once more.

"Hideous and absurd image?" I repeated, thinking instantly of my conversation of that morning with Lucilla. "What did Mr. Sebright mean by using such language as that?"

"Just what I asked him. His reply will interest you. It led him into that explanation of his motives which you inquired for just now. Shall we walk on?"

My petrified foreign feet recovered their activity. We went on again.

“When I had spoken to Mr. Sebright of Lucilla’s inveterate prejudice,” Oscar continued, “he had surprised me by saying that it was common in his experience, and was only curable by her restoration to sight. In support of those assertions, he now told me of two interesting cases which had occurred in his professional practice. The first was the case of the little daughter of an Indian officer — blind from infancy, like Lucilla. After operating successfully, the time came when he could permit his patient to try her sight—that is to say, to try if she could see sufficiently well at first, to distinguish dark objects from light. Among the members of the household assembled to witness the removal of the bandage, was an Indian nurse who had accompanied the family to England. The first person the child saw was her mother — a fair woman. She clasped her little hands in astonishment, and that was all. At the next turn of her head, she saw the dark Indian nurse—and instantly screamed with

terror. Mr. Sebright owned to me that he could not explain it. The child could have no possible association with colours. Yet there nevertheless was the most violent hatred and horror of a dark object (the hatred and horror peculiar to the blind) expressing itself unmistakably in a child of ten years old! My first thought, while he was telling me this, was of myself, and of my chance with Lucilla. My first question was, 'Did the child get used to the nurse?' I can give you his answer in his own words. 'In a week's time, I found the child sitting in the nurse's lap as composedly as I am sitting in this chair.' That is encouraging—isn't it?"

"Most encouraging—nobody can deny it."

"The second instance was more curious still. This time the case was the case of a grown man—and the object was to show me what strange fantastic images (utterly unlike the reality) the blind form of the people about them. The patient was married, and was to see his wife (as Lucilla is one day to see me) for the first time. He had been told, before he married her, that she was personally dis-

figured by the scar of a wound on one of her cheeks. The poor woman—ah, how well I can understand her!—trembled for the consequences. The man who had loved her dearly while he was blind, might hate her when he saw her scarred face. Her husband had been the first to console her when the operation was determined on. He declared that his sense of touch, and the descriptions given to him by others, had enabled him to form, in his own mind, the most complete and faithful image of his wife's face. Nothing that Mr. Sebright could say would induce him to believe that it was physically impossible for him to form a really correct idea of any object, animate or inanimate, which he had never seen. He wouldn't hear of it. He was so certain of the result, that he held his wife's hand in his, to encourage her, when the bandage was removed from him. At his first look at her, he uttered a cry of horror, and fell back in his chair in a swoon. His wife, poor thing, was distracted. Mr. Sebright did his best to compose her, and waited till her husband was able to answer the questions put

to him. It then appeared that his blind idea of his wife, and of her disfigurement, had been something so grotesquely and horribly unlike the reality, that it was hard to know whether to laugh or to tremble at it. She was as beautiful as an angel, by comparison with her husband's favourite idea of her—and yet, because it *was* his idea, he was absolutely disgusted and terrified at the first sight of her! In a few weeks, he was able to compare his wife with other women, to look at pictures, to understand what beauty was and what ugliness was—and from that time they have lived together as happy a married couple as any in the kingdom."

I was not quite sure which way this last example pointed. It alarmed me when I thought of Lucilla. I came to a standstill again.

"How did Mr. Sebright apply this second case to Lucilla and to you?" I asked.

"You shall hear," said Oscar. "He first appealed to the case as supporting his assertion that Lucilla's idea of me must be utterly unlike what I am myself. He asked if I was now satisfied that she could have no correct

conception of what faces and colours were really like? and if I agreed with him in believing that the image in her mind of the man with the blue face, was in all probability something fantastically and hideously unlike the reality? After what I had heard, I agreed with him as a matter of course. 'Very well,' says Mr. Sebright. 'Now let us remember that there is one important difference between the case of Miss Finch, and the case that I have just mentioned. The husband's blind idea of his wife was the husband's favourite idea. The shock of the first sight of her, was plainly a shock to him on that account. Now Miss Finch's blind idea of the blue face is, on the contrary, a hateful idea to her—the image is an image that she loathes. Is it not fair to conclude from this, that the first sight of you as you really are, is likely to be, in her case, a relief to her instead of a shock? Reasoning from my experience, I reach that conclusion; and I advise you, in your own interests, to be present when the bandage is taken off. Even if I prove to be mistaken—even if she is not immediately reconciled to the sight of you—

there is the other example of the child and the Indian nurse to satisfy you that it is only a question of time. Sooner or later, she will take the discovery as any other young lady would take it. At first, she will be indignant with you for deceiving her ; and then, if you are sure of your place in her affections, she will end in forgiving you.—There is my view of your position, and there are the grounds on which I form it ! In the meantime, my own opinion remains unshaken. I firmly believe that you will never have occasion to act on the advice that I have given to you. When the bandage is taken off, the chances are five hundred to one that she is no nearer to seeing you then than she is now.' These were his last words—and on that we parted."

Oscar and I walked on again for a little way, in silence.

I had nothing to say against Mr. Sebright's reasons ; it was impossible to question the professional experience from which they were drawn. As to blind people in general, I felt no doubt that his advice was good, and that

his conclusions were arrived at correctly. But Lucilla's was no ordinary character. My experience of her was better experience than Mr. Sebright's—and the more I thought of the future, the less inclined I felt to share Oscar's hopeful view. She was just the person to say something or do something, at the critical moment of the experiment, which would take the wisest previous calculation by surprise. Oscar's prospects never had looked darker to me than they looked at that moment.

It would have been useless and cruel to have said to him what I have just said here. I put as bright a face on it as I could, and asked if he proposed to follow Mr. Sebright's advice.

“Yes,” he said. “With a certain reservation of my own, which occurred to me after I had left his house.”

“May I ask what it is?”

“Certainly. I mean to beg Nugent to leave Dimchurch, before Lucilla tries her sight for the first time. He will do that, I know, to please me.”

“And when he has done it, what then?”

“Then I mean to be present—as Mr. Sebright suggested—when the bandage is taken off.”

“Previously telling Lucilla,” I interposed, “that it is you who are in the room?”

“No. There I take the precaution that I alluded to just now. I propose to leave Lucilla under the impression that it is I who have left Dimchurch, and that Nugent’s face is the face she sees. If Mr. Sebright proves to be right, and if her first sensation is a sensation of relief, I will own the truth to her the same day. If not, I will wait to make my confession until she has become reconciled to the sight of me. That plan meets every possible emergency. It is one of the few good ideas that my stupid head has hit on since I have been at Dimchurch.”

He said those last words with such an innocent air of triumph, that I really could not find it in my heart to damp his ardour by telling him what I thought of his idea. All I said was, “Don’t forget, Oscar, that the cleverest plans are at the mercy of circum-

stances. At the last moment, an accident may happen which will force you to speak out."

We came in sight of the rectory as I gave him that final warning. Nugent was strolling up and down the road on the look-out for us. I left Oscar to tell his story over again to his brother, and went into the house.

Lucilla was at her piano when I entered the sitting-room. She was not only playing—but (a rare thing with her) singing too. The song was, poetry and music both, of her own composing. "I shall see him! I shall see him!" In those four words the composition began and ended. She adapted them to all the happy melodies in her memory. She accompanied them with hands that seemed to be mad for joy—hands that threatened every moment to snap the chords of the instrument. Never, since my first day at the rectory, had I heard such a noise in our quiet sitting-room as I heard now. She was in a fever of exhilaration which, in my foreboding frame of mind at that moment, it pained and shocked me to see. I lifted her off the music-stool, and shut up the piano by main force.

"Compose yourself for heaven's sake," I said. "Do you want to be completely exhausted when the German comes to-morrow?"

That consideration instantly checked her. She suddenly became quiet, with the abrupt facility of a child.

"I forgot that," she said, sitting down in a corner, with a face of dismay. "He might refuse to perform the operation! Oh, my dear, quiet me down somehow. Get a book, and read to me."

I got the book. Ah, the poor author! Neither she nor I paid the slightest attention to him. Worse still, we abused him for not interesting us—and then shut him up with a bang, and pushed him rudely into his place on the book-shelf, and left him upside down, and went to bed.

She was standing at her window when I went in to wish her good night. The mellow moonlight fell tenderly on her lovely face.

"Moon that I have never seen," she murmured softly, "I feel you looking at me! Is the time coming when *I* shall look at You?" She turned from the window, and eagerly put

my fingers on her pulse. "Am I quite composed again?" she asked. "Will he find me well to-morrow? Feel it! feel it! Is it quiet now?"

I felt it—throbbing faster and faster.

"Sleep will quiet it," I said—and kissed her, and left her.

She slept well. As for me, I passed such a wretched night, and got up so completely worn out, that I had to go back to my room, after breakfast, and lie down again. Lucilla persuaded me to do it. "Herr Grosse won't be here till the afternoon," she said. "Rest till he comes."

We had reckoned without allowing for the eccentric character of our German surgeon. Excepting the business of his profession, Herr Grosse did everything by impulse, and nothing by rule. I had not long fallen into a broken unrefreshing sleep, when I felt Zillah's hand on my shoulder, and heard Zillah's voice in my ear.

"Please to get up, ma'am! He's here—he has come from London by the morning train."

I hurried into the sitting-room.

There, at the table, sat Herr Grosse with an open instrument-case before him ; his wild black eyes gloating over a hideous array of scissors, probes, and knives, and his shabby hat hard by with lint and bandages huddled together anyhow inside it. And there stood Lucilla by his side, stooping over him—with one hand laid familiarly on his shoulder, and with the other deftly fingering one of his horrid instruments to find out what it was like !

THE END

OF

THE FIRST PART.

PART THE SECOND.



CHAPTER THE TENTH.

NUGENT SHOWS HIS HAND.

NCLOSED the First Part of my narrative on the day of the operation, the twenty-fifth of June.

I open the Second Part, between six and seven weeks later, on the ninth of August.

How did the time pass at Dimchurch in that interval?

Searching backwards in my memory, I call to life again the domestic history of the six weeks. It looks, on retrospection, miserably dull and empty of incident. I wonder when I contemplate it now, how we got through that weary interval—how we bore that forced

inaction, that unrelieved oppression of suspense.

Changing from bed-room to sitting-room, from sitting-room back to bed-room; with the daylight always shut out; with the bandages always on, except when the surgeon looked at her eyes; Lucilla bore the imprisonment—and worse than the imprisonment, the uncertainty—of her period of probation, with the courage that can endure anything, the courage sustained by Hope. With books, with music, with talk—above all, with Love to help her—she counted her way calmly through the dull succession of hours and days till the time came which was to decide the question in dispute between the oculists—the terrible question of which of the two, Mr. Sebright or Herr Grosse, was right.

I was not present at the examination which finally decided all doubt. I joined Oscar in the garden—quite as incapable as he was of exerting the slightest self-control. We paced silently backwards and forwards on the lawn,

like two animals in a cage. Zillah was the only witness present when the German examined our poor darling's eyes; Nugent engaging to wait in the next room and announce the result from the window. As the event turned out, Herr Grosse was beforehand with him. Once more, we heard his broken-English shouting, "Hi-hi-hoi! hoi-hi! hoi-hi!" Once more, we beheld his huge silk handkerchief waving at the window. I turned sick and faint under the excitement of the moment — under the rapture (it was nothing less) of hearing those three electrifying words: "She will see!" Mercy! how we did abuse Mr. Sebright, when we were all re-united again in Lucilla's room!

The first excitement over, we had our difficulties to contend with next.

From the moment when she was positively informed that the operation had succeeded, our once-patient Lucilla developed into a new being. She now rose in perpetual revolt against the caution which still deferred the day on which she was to be allowed to make the first trial of her sight. It required all

my influence, backed by Oscar's entreaties, and strengthened by the furious foreign English of our excellent German surgeon (Herr Grosse had a temper of his own, I can tell you !) to prevent her from breaking through the medical discipline which held her in its grasp. When she became quite unmanageable, and vehemently abused him to his face, our good Grosse used to swear at her, in a compound bad language of his own, with a tremendous aspiration at the beginning of it, which always set matters right by making her laugh. I see him again as I write, leaving the room on these occasions, with his eyes blazing through his spectacles, and his shabby hat cocked sideways on his head. "Soh, you little-spitfire-Feench ! If you touch that bandages when I have put him on—Ho-Damn-Damn ! I say no more. Good-bye !"

From Lucilla I turn to the twin-brothers next.

Tranquillised as to the future, after his interview with Mr. Sebright, Oscar presented himself at his best during the time of which I am now writing. Lucilla's main reliance,

in her days in the darkened room, was on what her lover could do to relieve and to encourage her. He never once failed her ; his patience was perfect ; his devotion was inexhaustible. It is sad to say so, in view of what happened afterwards ; but I only tell a necessary truth when I declare that he immensely strengthened his hold on her affections, in those last days of her blindness when his society was most precious to her. Ah, how fervently she used to talk of him when she and I were left together at night ! Forgive me if I leave this part of the history of the courtship untold. I don't like to write of it—I don't like to think of it. Let us get on to something else.

Nugent comes next. I would give a great deal, poor as I am, to be able to leave him out. It is not to be done. I must write about that lost wretch, and you must read about him, whether we like it or not.

The days of Lucilla's imprisonment, were also the days when my favourite disappointed me, for the first time. He and his brother seemed to change places. It was Nugent

now who appeared to disadvantage by comparison with Oscar. He surprised and grieved his brother by leaving Browndown. "All I can do for you, I have done," he said. "I can be of no further use for the present to anybody. Let me go. I am stagnating in this miserable place—I must, and will, have change." Oscar's entreaties, in Nugent's present frame of mind, failed to move him. Away he went one morning, without bidding anybody good-bye. He had talked of being absent for a week—he remained away for a month. We heard of him, leading a wild life, among a vicious set of men. It was reported that a frantic restlessness possessed him which nobody could understand. He came back as suddenly as he had left us. His variable nature had swung round, in the interval, to the opposite extreme. He was full of repentance for his reckless conduct ; he was in a state of depression which defied rousing ; he despaired of himself and his future. Sometimes he talked of going back to America ; and sometimes he threatened to close his career by enlisting as a private soldier.

Would any other person, in my place, have seen which way these signs pointed? I doubt it, if that person's mind had been absorbed, as mine was, in watching Lucilla day by day. Even if I had been a suspicious woman by nature—which, thank God, I am not—my distrust must have lain dormant, in the all-subduing atmosphere of suspense hanging heavily on me morning, noon, and night in the darkened room.

So much, briefly, for the sayings and doings of the persons principally concerned in this narrative, during the six weeks which separate Part the First from Part the Second.

I begin again on the ninth of August.

This was the memorable day chosen by Herr Grosse for risking the experiment of removing the bandage, and permitting Lucilla to try her sight for the first time. Conceive for yourselves (don't ask me to describe) the excitement that raged in our obscure little circle, now that we were standing face to face with that grand Event in our lives which I

promised to relate in the opening sentence of these pages.

I was the earliest riser at the rectory that morning. My excitable French blood was in a fever. I was irresistibly reminded of myself, at a time long past—the time when my glorious Pratolungo and I, succumbing to Fate and tyrants, fled to England for safety; martyrs to that ungrateful Republic (long live the Republic!) for which I laid down my money and my husband his life.

I opened my window, and hailed the good omen of sunrise in a clear sky. Just as I was turning away again from the view, I saw a figure steal out from the shrubbery and appear on the lawn. The figure came nearer. I recognised Oscar.

“What in the world are you doing there, at this time in the morning?” I called out.

He lifted his finger to his lips, and came close under my window before he answered.

“Hush!” he said. “Don’t let Lucilla hear you. Come down to me as soon as you can. I am waiting to speak to you.”

When I joined him in the garden, I saw directly that something had gone wrong.

“Bad news from Browndown?” I asked.

“Nugent has disappointed me,” he answered. “Do you remember the evening when you met me after my consultation with Mr. Sebright?”

“Perfectly.”

“I told you that I meant to ask Nugent to leave Dimchurch, on the day when Lucilla tried her sight for the first time.”

“Well?”

“Well—he refuses to leave Dimchurch.”

“Have you explained your motives to him?”

“Carefully—before I asked him to go. I told him how impossible it was to say what might happen. I reminded him that it might be of the utmost importance to me to preserve the impression now in Lucilla’s mind—for a certain time only—after Lucilla could see. I promised, the moment she became reconciled to the sight of me, to recall him, and in his presence to tell her the truth. All

that I said to him—and how do you think he answered me?"

"Did he positively refuse?"

"No. He walked away from me to the window, and considered a little. Then he turned round suddenly and said, 'What did you tell me was Mr. Sebright's opinion? Mr. Sebright thought she would be relieved instead of being terrified. In that case, what need is there for me to go away? You can acknowledge at once that she has seen your face, and not mine?' He put his hands in his pockets when he had said that (you know Nugent's downright way)—and turned back to the window as if he had settled everything."

"What did you say, on your side?"

"I said, 'Suppose Mr. Sebright is wrong?' He only answered, 'Suppose Mr. Sebright is right?' I followed him to the window—I never heard him speak so sourly to me as he spoke at that moment. 'What is your objection to going away for a day or two?' I asked. 'My objection is soon stated,' he answered. 'I am sick of these everlasting

complications. It is useless and cruel to carry on the deception any longer. Mr. Sebright's advice is the wise advice and the right advice. Let her see you as you are.' With that answer, he walked out of the room. Something has upset him—I can't imagine what it is. Do pray see what you can make of him! My only hope is in you."

I own I felt reluctant to interfere. Suddenly and strangely as Nugent had altered his point of view, it seemed to me undeniable that Nugent was right. At the same time, Oscar looked so disappointed and distressed, that it was really impossible, on that day above all others, to pain him additionally by roundly saying No. I undertook to do what I could—and I inwardly hoped that circumstances would absolve me from the necessity of doing anything at all.

Circumstances failed to justify my selfish confidence in them.

I was out in the village, after breakfast, on a domestic errand connected with the necessary culinary preparations for the reception of Herr Grosse—when I heard my name pro-

nounced behind me, and, turning round, found myself face to face with Nugent.

“Has my brother been bothering you this morning,” he asked, “before I was up?”

I instantly noticed a return in him, as he said that, to the same dogged ungracious manner which had perplexed and displeased me at my last confidential interview with him in the rectory garden.

“Oscar has been speaking to me this morning,” I replied.

“About me?”

“About you. You have distressed and disappointed him——”

“I know! I know! Oscar is worse than a child. I am beginning to lose all patience with him.”

“I am sorry to hear you say that, Nugent. You have borne with him so kindly thus far—surely you can make allowances for him to-day? His whole future may depend on what happens in Lucilla’s sitting-room a few hours hence.”

“He is making a mountain out of a mole-hill—and so are you.”

Those words were spoken bitterly—almost rudely. I answered sharply on my side.

“ You are the last person living who has any right to say that. Oscar is in a false position towards Lucilla, with your knowledge and consent. In your brother’s interests, you agreed to the fraud that has been practised on her. In your brother’s interests, again, you are asked to leave Dimchurch. Why do you refuse ?”

“ I refuse, because I have come round to your way of thinking. What did you say of Oscar and of me, in the summer-house ? You said we were taking a cruel advantage of Lucilla’s blindness. You were right. It *was* cruel not to have told her the truth. I won’t be a party to concealing the truth from her any longer ! I refuse to persist in deceiving her—in meanly deceiving her—on the day when she recovers her sight !”

It is entirely beyond my power to describe the tone in which he made that reply. I can only declare that it struck me dumb for the moment. I drew a step nearer to him. With vague misgivings in me, I looked him search-

ingly in the face. He looked back at me, without shrinking.

“ Well?” he asked—with a hard smile which defied me to put him in the wrong.

I could discover nothing in his face—I could only follow my instincts as a woman. Those instincts warned me to accept his explanation.

“ I am to understand then that you have decided on staying here ?” I said.

“ Certainly !”

“ What do you propose to do, when Herr Grosse arrives, and we assemble in Lucilla’s room ?”

“ I propose to be present among the rest of you, at the most interesting moment of Lucilla’s life.”

“ No ! you don’t propose that !”

“ I do !”

“ You have forgotten something, Mr. Nugent Dubourg.”

“ What is it, Madame Pratolungo ?”

“ You have forgotten that Lucilla believes the brother with the discoloured face to be You, and the brother with the fair complexion

to be Oscar. You have forgotten that the surgeon has expressly forbidden us to agitate her by entering into any explanations before he allows her to use her eyes. You have forgotten that the very deception which you have just positively refused to go on with, will be nevertheless a deception continued, if you are present when Lucilla sees. Your own resolution pledges you not to enter the rectory doors until Lucilla has discovered the truth." In those words, I closed the vice on him. I had got Mr. Nugent Dubourg !

He turned deadly pale. His eyes dropped before mine for the first time.

" Thank you for reminding me," he said.
" I *had* forgotten."

He pronounced those submissive words in a suddenly-lowered voice. Something in his tone, or something in the dropping of his eyes, set my heart beating quickly, with a certain vague expectation which I was unable to realise to myself.

" You agree with me," I said, " that you cannot be one amongst us at the rectory ? What will you do ?"

"I will remain at Browndown," he answered.

I felt he was lying. Don't ask for my reasons. I have no reasons to give. When he said "I will remain at Browndown," I felt he was lying.

"Why not do what Oscar asks of you?" I went on. "If you are absent, you may as well be in one place as in another. There is plenty of time still to leave Dimchurch."

He looked up as suddenly as he had looked down.

"Do you and Oscar think me a stock or a stone?" he burst out angrily.

"What do you mean?"

"Who are you indebted to for what is going to happen to-day?" he went on, more and more passionately. "You are indebted to Me. Who among you all stood alone in refusing to believe that she was blind for life? *I* did! Who brought the man here who has given her back her sight? *I* brought the man! And I am the one person who is to be left in ignorance of how it ends. The others are to be present: I am to be sent away.

The others are to see it : I am to hear by post (if any of you think of writing to me) what she does, what she says, how she looks, at the first heavenly moment when she opens her eyes on the world.” He flung up his hand in the air, and burst out savagely with a bitter laugh. “ I astonish you, don’t I ? I am claiming a position which I have no right to occupy. What interest can *I* feel in it ? Oh God ! what do *I* care about the woman to whom I have given a new life ? ” His voice broke into a sob at those last wild words. He tore at the breast of his coat as if he was suffocating—and turned, and left me.

I stood rooted to the spot. In one breathless instant, the truth broke on me like a revelation. At last I had penetrated the terrible secret. Nugent loved her.

My first impulse, when I recovered myself, hurried me at the top of my speed back to the rectory. For a moment or two, I think I must really have lost my senses. I felt a frantic suspicion that he had gone into the house, and that he was making his way to Lucilla at that moment. When I found that

all was quiet—when Zillah had satisfied me that no visitor had come near our side of the rectory—I calmed down a little, and went back to the garden to compose myself before I ventured into Lucilla's presence.

After a while, I got over the first horror of it, and saw my own position plainly. There was not a living soul at Dimchurch in whom I could confide. Come what might of it, in this dreadful emergency, I must trust in myself alone.

I had just arrived at that startling conclusion ; I had shed some bitter tears when I remembered how hardly I had judged poor Oscar on more than one occasion ; I had decided that my favourite Nugent was the most hateful villain living, and that I would leave nothing undone that the craft of a woman could compass to drive him out of the place—when I was forced back to present necessities by the sound of Zillah's voice calling to me from the house. I went to her directly. The nurse had a message for me from her young mistress. My poor Lucilla was lonely and anxious : she was surprised

at my leaving her, she insisted on seeing me immediately.

I took my first precaution against a surprise from Nugent, as I crossed the threshold of the door.

“Our dear child must not be disturbed by visitors to-day,” I said to Zillah. “If Mr. Nugent Dubourg comes here and asks for her—don’t tell Lucilla ; tell *me*.”

This said, I went up-stairs, and joined my darling in the darkened room.





CHAPTER THE ELEVENTH.

LUCILLA TRIES HER SIGHT.

HE was sitting alone in the dim light, with the bandage over her eyes, with her pretty hands crossed patiently on her lap. My heart swelled in me as I looked at her, and felt the horrid discovery that I had made still present in my mind. “Forgive me for leaving you,” I said in as steady a voice as I could command at the moment—and kissed her.

She instantly discovered my agitation, carefully as I thought I had concealed it.

“You are frightened too!” she exclaimed taking my hands in hers.

“Frightened, my love?” I repeated. (I

was perfectly stupefied; I really did not know what to say!)

“Yes. Now the time is so near, I feel my courage failing me. I forbode all sorts of horrible things. Oh! when will it be over? what will Oscar look like when I see him?”

I answered the first question. Who could answer the second?

“Herr Grosse comes to us by the morning train,” I said. “It will soon be over.”

“Where is Oscar?”

“On his way here, I have no doubt.”

“Describe him to me once more,” she said eagerly. “For the last time, before I see. His eyes, his hair, his complexion—everything!”

How I should have got through the painful task which she had innocently imposed on me, if I had attempted to perform it, I hardly like to think. To my infinite relief, I was interrupted at my first word by the opening of the door, and the sudden appearance of a family deputation in the room.

First, strutting with slow and solemn steps, with one hand laid pathetically on the breast

of his clerical waistcoat, appeared Reverend Finch. After him, came his wife, shorn of all her proper accompaniments—except the baby. Without her novel, without her jacket, petticoat, or shawl, without even the hand-kerchief which she was always losing—clothed, for the first time in my experience, in a complete gown—the metamorphosis of damp Mrs. Finch was complete. But for the baby, I believe I should have taken her, in the dim light, for a stranger! She stood (apparently doubtful of her reception) hesitating in the doorway, and so hiding a third member of the deputation—who appealed piteously to the general notice in a small voice which I knew well, and in a form of address familiar to me from past experience.

“Jicks wants to come in.”

The rector took his hand from his waistcoat, and held it up in faint protest against the intrusion of the third member. Mrs. Finch moved mechanically into the room. Jicks appeared, hugging her disreputable doll, and showing signs of recent wandering in the white dust which dropped on the carpet from

her frock and her shoes, as she advanced towards the place in which I was sitting. Arrived in front of me, she peered quaintly up at my face, through the obscurity of the room ; lifted her doll by the legs ; hit me a smart rap with the head of it on my knee ; and said—

“ Jicks will sit here.”

I rubbed my knee, and enthroned Jicks as ordered. At the same time, Mr. Finch solemnly stalked up to his daughter ; laid his hands on her head ; raised his eyes to the ceiling ; and said in bass notes that rumbled with paternal emotion, “ Bless you, my child !”

At the sound of her husband’s magnificent voice, Mrs. Finch became herself again. She said meekly, “ How d’ye do, Lucilla ?”—and sat down in a corner, and suckled the baby.

Mr. Finch set in for one of his harangues.

“ My advice has been neglected, Lucilla. My paternal influence has been repudiated. My Moral Weight has been, so to speak, set aside. I don’t complain. Understand me—I simply state sad facts.” (Here he became

aware of my existence.) "Good morning, Madame Pratolungo; I hope I see you well? —There has been variance between us, Lucilla. I come, my child, with healing on my wings (healing being understood, for present purposes, as reconciliation) — I come and bring Mrs. Finch with me—don't speak, Mrs. Finch! —to offer my heartfelt wishes, my fervent prayers, on this the most eventful day in my daughter's life. No vulgar curiosity has turned my steps this way. No hint shall escape my lips, touching any misgivings which I may still feel as to this purely worldly interference with the ways of an inscrutable Providence. I am here as parent and peacemaker. My wife accompanies me —don't speak, Mrs. Finch! —as step-parent and step-peacemaker. (You understand the distinction, Madame Pratolungo? Thank you. Good creature.) Shall I preach forgiveness of injuries from the pulpit, and not practise that forgiveness at home? Can I remain, on this momentous occasion, at variance with my child? Lucilla! I forgive you. With full heart and tearful eyes, I for-

give you. (You have never had any children, I believe, Madame Pratolungo? Ah! you cannot possibly understand this. Not your fault. Good creature, not your fault.) The kiss of peace, my child; the kiss of peace." He solemnly bent his bristly head, and deposited the kiss of peace on Lucilla's forehead. He sighed superbly, and in a burst of magnanimity, held out his hand next to *me*. "My Hand, Madame Pratolungo. Compose yourself. Don't cry. God bless you." Mrs. Finch, deeply affected by her husband's noble conduct, began to sob hysterically. The baby, disarranged in his proceedings by the emotions of his mama, set up a sympathetic scream. Mr. Finch crossed the room to them, with domestic healing on his wings. "This does you credit, Mrs. Finch; but, under the circumstances, it must not be continued. Control yourself, in consideration of the infant. Mysterious mechanism of Nature!" cried the rector, raising his prodigious voice over the louder and louder screeching of the baby. "Marvellous and beautiful sympathy which makes the maternal sustenance the

conducting medium, as it were, of disturbance between the mother and child. What problems confront us, what forces environ us, even in this mortal life ! Nature ! Maternity ! Inscrutable Providence !”

“ Inscrutable Providence ” was the rector’s fatal phrase—it always brought with it an interruption ; and it brought one now. Before Mr. Finch (brimful of pathetic apostrophes) could burst into more exclamations, the door opened, and Oscar walked into the room.

Lucilla instantly recognised his footstep.

“ Any signs, Oscar, of Herr Grosse ?” she asked.

“ Yes. His chaise has been seen on the road. He will be here directly.”

Giving that answer, and passing by my chair to place himself on the other side of Lucilla, Oscar cast at me one imploring look—a look which said plainly, “ Don’t desert me when the time comes !” I nodded my head to show that I understood him and felt for him. He sat down in the vacant chair by Lucilla, and took her hand in silence. It was hard to say which of the two felt the position, at that

trying moment, most painfully. I don't think I ever saw any sight so simply and irresistibly touching as the sight of those two poor young creatures sitting hand in hand, waiting the event which was to make the happiness or the misery of their future lives.

“Have you seen anything of your brother?” I asked, putting the question in as careless a tone as my devouring anxiety would allow me to assume.

“Nugent has gone to meet Herr Grosse.”

Oscar's eyes once more encountered mine, as he replied in those terms; I saw again the imploring look more marked in them than ever. It was plain to him, as it was plain to me, that Nugent had gone to meet the German, with the purpose of making Herr Grosse the innocent means of bringing him into the house.

Before I could speak again, Mr. Finch, recovering himself after the interruption which had silenced him, saw his opportunity of setting in for another harangue. Mrs. Finch had left off sobbing; the baby had left off screaming; the rest of us were silent and nervous.

In a word, Mr. Finch's domestic congregation was entirely at Mr. Finch's mercy. He strutted up to Oscar's chair. Was he going to propose to read *Hamlet*? No! He was going to invoke a blessing on Oscar's head.

"On this interesting occasion," began the rector in his pulpit tones; "now that we are all united in the same room, all animated by the same hope—I could wish, as pastor and parent (God bless you, Oscar: I look on you as a son. Mrs. Finch, follow my example, look on him as a son!): I could wish, as pastor and parent, to say a few pious and consoling words——"

The door—the friendly, admirable, judicious door—stopped the coming sermon, in the nick of time, by opening again. Herr Grosse's squat figure and owlish spectacles appeared on the threshold. And behind him (exactly as I had anticipated) stood Nugent Dubourg.

Lucilla turned deadly pale—she had heard the door open, she knew by instinct that the surgeon had come. Oscar got up, stole behind my chair, and whispered to me, "For

God's sake, get Nugent out of the room!" I gave him a reassuring squeeze of the hand, and, putting Jicks down on the floor, rose to welcome our good Grosse.

The child, as it happened, was beforehand with me. She and the illustrious oculist had met in the garden at one of the German's professional visits to Lucilla, and had taken an amazing fancy to each other. Herr Grosse never afterwards appeared at the rectory without some unwholesome eatable thing in his pocket for Jicks ; who gave him in return as many kisses as he might ask for, and further distinguished him as the only living creature whom she permitted to nurse the disreputable doll. Grasping this same doll now, with both hands, and using it head-foremost as a kind of battering-ram, Jicks plunged in front of me, and butted with all her might at the surgeon's bandy legs ; insisting on a monopoly of his attention before he presumed to speak to any other person in the room. While he was lifting her to a level with his face, and talking to her in his wonderful broken English—while the rector and Mrs. Finch were making the

necessary apologies for the child's conduct—Nugent came round from behind Herr Grosse, and drew me mysteriously into a corner of the room. As I followed him, I saw the silent torture of anxiety expressed in Oscar's face as he stood by Lucilla's chair. It did me good; it strung up my resolution to the right pitch; it made me feel myself a match, and more than a match, for Nugent Dubourg.

“I am afraid I behaved in a very odd manner, when we met in the village?” he said. “The fact is, I am not at all well. I have been in a strange feverish state lately. I don't think the air of this place suits me.” There he stopped; keeping his eyes steadily fixed on mine, trying to read my mind in my face.

“I am not surprised to hear you say that,” I answered. “I have noticed that you have not been looking well lately.”

My tone and manner (otherwise perfectly composed) expressed polite sympathy—and nothing more. I saw I puzzled him. He tried again.

“I hope I didn't say or do anything rude?” he went on.

“Oh, no !”

“I was excited—painfully excited. You are too kind to admit it ; I am sure I owe you my apologies ?”

“No, indeed ! you were certainly excited, as you say. But we are all in the same state to-day. The occasion, Mr. Nugent, is your sufficient apology.”

Not the slightest sign in my face of any sort of suspicion of him, rewarded the close and continued scrutiny with which he regarded me. I saw in his perplexed expression, the certain assurance that I was beating him at his own weapons. He made a last effort to entrap me into revealing that I suspected his secret—he attempted, by irritating my quick temper, to take me by surprise.

“You are no doubt astonished at seeing me here,” he resumed. “I have not forgotten that I promised to remain at Browndown instead of coming to the rectory. Don’t be angry with me : I am under medical orders which forbid me to keep my promise.”

“I don’t understand you,” I said just as coolly as ever.

“I will explain myself,” he rejoined. “You remember that we long since took Grosse into our confidence, on the subject of Oscar’s position towards Lucilla?”

“I am not likely to have forgotten it,” I answered, “considering that it was I who first warned your brother that Herr Grosse might do terrible mischief by innocently letting out the truth.”

“Do you recollect how Grosse took the warning, when we gave it to him?”

“Perfectly. He promised to be careful. But, at the same time, he gruffly forbad us to involve him in any more of our family troubles. He said he was determined to preserve his professional freedom of action, without being hampered by domestic difficulties which might concern *us*, but which did not concern *him*. Is my memory accurate enough to satisfy you?”

“Your memory is wonderful. You will now understand me when I tell you that Grosse asserts his professional freedom of action on this occasion. I had it from his own lips on our way here. He considers it very

important that Lucilla should not be frightened at the moment when she tries her sight. Oscar's face is sure to startle her, if it is the first face she sees. Grosse has accordingly requested me to be present (as the only other young man in the room), and to place myself so that I shall be the first person who attracts her notice. Ask him yourself, Madame Pratolungo, if you don't believe me."

"Of course I believe you!" I answered. "It is useless to dispute the surgeon's orders at such a time as this."

With that, I left him.; showing just as much annoyance as an unsuspecting woman, in my position, might have naturally betrayed—and no more. Knowing, as I did, what was going on under the surface, I understood only too plainly what had happened. Nugent had caught at the opportunity which the surgeon had innocently offered to him, as a means of misleading Lucilla at the moment, and (possibly) of taking some base advantage of her afterwards. I trembled inwardly with rage and fear, as I turned my back on him. Our one chance was to make sure of his

absence, at the critical moment—and, cudgel my brains as I might, how to reach that end successfully was more than I could see.

When I returned to the other persons in the room, Oscar and Lucilla were still occupying the same positions. Mr. Finch had presented himself (at full length) to Herr Grosse. And Jicks was established on a stool in a corner; devouring a rampant horse, carved in biliary-yellow German gingerbread, with a voracious relish wonderful and terrible to see.

“Ah, my goot Madame Pratolungo!” said Herr Grosse, stopping on his way to Lucilla to shake hands with me. “Have you made anodder lofely Mayonnaise? I have come on purpose with an empty-stomachs, and a wolf’s-appetite in fine order. Look at that little Imps,” he went on, pointing to Jicks. “Ach Gott! I believe I am in lofe with her. I have sent all the ways to Germany for gingerbreads for Jick. Aha, you Jick! does it stick in your tooths? Is it nice-clammy-sweet?” He glared benevolently at the child through his spectacles; and tucked my hand sentimentally into the breast of his waistcoat. “Promise

me a child like adorable Jick," he said solemnly, "I will marry the first wife you bring me—nice womans, nasty womans, I don't care which. Soh! there is my domestic sentiments laid bare before you. Enough of that. Now for my pretty-Feench! Come-begin-begin!"

He crossed the room to Lucilla, and called to Nugent to follow him.

"Open the shutters," he said. "Light-light-light, and plenty of him, for my lofely Feench!"

Nugent opened the shutters, beginning with the lower window, and ending with the window at which Lucilla was sitting. Acting on this plan, he had only to wait where he was, to place himself close by her—to be the first object she saw. He did it. The villain did it. I stepped forward, determined to interfere—and stopped, not knowing what to say or do. I could have beaten my own stupid brains out against the wall. There stood Nugent right before her, as the surgeon turned his patient towards the window. And not the ghost of an idea came to me!

The German stretched out his hairy hands, and took hold of the knot of the bandage to undo it.

Lucilla trembled from head to foot.

Herr Grosse hesitated—looked at her—let go of the bandage—and lifting one of her hands, laid his fingers on her pulse.

In the moment of silence that followed, I had one of my inspirations. The missing idea turned up in my brains at last.

“Soh!” cried Grosse, dropping her hand with a sudden outbreak of annoyance and surprise. “Who has been frightening my pretty Feench? Why these cold trembles? these sinking pulses? Some of you tell me—what does it mean?”

Here was my opportunity! I tried my idea on the spot.

“It means,” I said, “that there are too many people in this room. We confuse her, and frighten her. Take her into her bedroom, Herr Grosse; and only let the rest of us in, when you think right—one at a time.”

Our excellent surgeon instantly seized on my idea, and made it his own.

"You are a phenix among womens," he said, paternally patting me on the shoulder. "Which is most perfectest, your advice or your Mayonnaise, I am at a loss to know." He turned to Lucilla, and raised her gently from her chair. "Come into your own rooms with me, my poor little Feench. I shall see if I dare take off your bandages to-day."

Lucilla clasped her hands entreatingly.

"You promised!" she said. "Oh, Herr Grosse, you promised to let me use my eyes to-day!"

"Answer me this!" retorted the German. "Did I know, when I promised, that I should find you all shaky-pale, as white as my shirts when he comes back from the wash?"

"I am quite myself again," she pleaded faintly. "I am quite fit to have the bandage taken off."

"What! you know better than I do? Which of us is surgeon-optic—you or me? No more of this. Come under my arms! Come into the odder rooms!"

He put her arm in his, and walked with her to the door. There, her variable humour sud-

denly changed. She rallied on the instant. Her face flushed ; her courage came back. To my horror, she snatched her arm away from the surgeon, and refused to leave the room.

“No!” she said. “I am quite composed again ; I claim your promise. Examine me here. I must and will have my first look at Oscar in this room.”

(I was afraid—literally afraid—to turn my eyes Oscar’s way. I glanced at Nugent instead. There was a devilish smile on his face that it nearly drove me mad to see.)

“You must and weel?” repeated Grosse. “Now, mind!” He took out his watch. “I give you one little minutes, to think in. If you don’t come with me in that time, you shall find it is I who must and weel. Now!”

“Why do you object to go into your room?” I asked.

“Because I want everybody to see me,” she answered. “How many of you are there here?”

“There are five of us. Mr. and Mrs. Finch; Mr. Nugent Dubourg ; Oscar, and myself.”

"I wish there were five hundred of you, instead of five?" she burst out.

"Why?"

"Because you would see me pick out Oscar from all the rest, the instant the bandage was off my eyes!"

Still holding to her own fatal conviction that the image in her mind of Oscar was the right one! For the second time, though I felt the longing in me to look at him, I shrank from doing it.

Herr Grosse put his watch back in his pocket.

"The minutes is past," he said, "Will you come into the odder rooms? Will you understand that I cannot properly examine you before all these peoples? Say, my losely Feench —Yes? or No?"

"No!" she cried obstinately, with a childish stamp of her foot. "I insist on showing everybody that I can pick out Oscar, the moment I open my eyes."

Herr Grosse buttoned his coat, settled his owlish spectacles firmly on his nose, and took up his hat. "Goot morning," he said. "I

have nothing more to do with you or your eyes. Cure yourself, you little-spitfire-Feench. I am going back to London."

He opened the door. Even Lucilla was obliged to yield, when the surgeon in attendance on her threatened to throw up the case.

"You brute!" she said indignantly—and took his arm again.

Grosse indulged himself in his diabolical grin. "When you are able to use your eyes, my lofe, you will see that I am not such a brutes as I look." With those words he took her out.

We were left in the sitting-room, to wait until the surgeon had decided whether he would, or would not, let Lucilla try her sight on that day.

While the others were, in their various ways, all suffering the same uneasy sense of expectation, I was as quiet in my mind as the baby now sleeping in his mother's arms. Thanks to Grosse's resolution to act on the hint that I had given to him, I had now made it impossible—even if the bandage was removed on that day—for Nugent to catch Lu-

cilla's first look when she opened her eyes. Her betrothed husband might certainly, on such a special occasion as this, be admitted into her bed-chamber, in company with her father or with me. But the commonest sense of propriety would dictate the closing of the door on Nugent. In the sitting-room he must wait (if he still persisted in remaining at the rectory) until she was allowed to join him there. I privately resolved, having the control of the matter now in my own hands, that this should not happen until Lucilla knew which of the twins was Nugent, and which was Oscar. A delicious inward glow of triumph diffused itself all through me. I resisted the strong temptation that I felt to discover how Nugent bore his defeat. If I had yielded to it, he would have seen in my face that I gloried in having outwitted him. I sat down, the picture of innocence, in the nearest chair, and crossed my hands on my lap, a composed and ladylike person, edifying to see.

The slow minutes followed each other—and still we waited the event in silence. Even

Mr. Finch's tongue was, on this solitary occasion, a tongue incapable of pronouncing a single word. He sat by his wife at one end of the room. Oscar and I were at the other. Nugent stood by himself at one of the windows, deep in his own thoughts, plotting how he could pay me out.

Oscar was the first of the party who broke the silence. After looking all round the room, he suddenly addressed himself to me.

“Madame Pratolungo!” he exclaimed. “What has become of Jicks?” .

I had completely forgotten the child. I too looked round the room, and satisfied myself that she had really disappeared. Mrs. Finch, observing our astonishment, timidly enlightened us. The maternal eye had seen Jicks slip out of the room at Herr Grosse's heels. The child's object was plain enough. While there was any probability of the presence of more gingerbread in the surgeon's pocket, the wandering Arab of the family (as stealthy and as quick as a cat) was certain to keep within reach of her friend. Nobody who knew her could doubt that she had slipped into Lucilla's

bed-chamber, under cover of Herr Grosse's ample coat-tails.

We had just accounted in this way for the mysterious absence of Jicks, when we heard the bed-chamber door opened, and the surgeon's voice calling for Zillah. In a minute more the nurse appeared, the bearer of a message from the next room.

We all surrounded her, with one and the same question to ask. What had Herr Grosse decided to do? The answer informed us that he had decided on forbidding Lucilla to try her eyes that day.

"Is she very much disappointed?" Oscar inquired anxiously.

"I can hardly say, sir. She isn't like herself. I never knew Miss Lucilla so quiet when she was crossed in her wishes, before. When the doctor called me into the room, she said: 'Go in, Zillah, and tell them.' Those words, sir, and no more."

"Did she express no wish to see me?" I inquired.

"No, ma'am. I took the liberty of asking her if she wished to see you. Miss Lucilla

shook her head, and sat herself down on the sofa, and made the doctor sit by her. ‘Leave us by ourselves.’ Those were the last words she said to me, before I came in here.”

Reverend Finch put the next question. The Pope of Dimchurch was himself again : the man of many words saw his chance of speaking once more.

“Good woman,” said the rector with ponderous politeness, “step this way. I wish to address an inquiry to you. Did Miss Finch make any remark, in your hearing, indicating a desire to be comforted by My Ministrations —as one bearing the double relation towards her of pastor and parent ?”

“I didn’t hear Miss Lucilla say anything to that effect, sir.”

Mr. Finch waved his hand with a look of disgust, intimating that Zillah’s audience was over. Nugent, upon that, came forward, and stopped her as she was leaving the room.

“Have you nothing more to tell us ?” he asked.

“No, sir.”

"Why don't they come back here? What are they doing in the other room?"

"They were doing what I mentioned just now, sir—they were sitting side by side on the sofa. Miss Lucilla was talking, and the doctor was listening to her. And Jicks," added Zillah, addressing herself confidentially to me, "was behind them, picking the doctor's pocket."

Oscar put in a word there—by no means in his most gracious manner.

"What was Miss Lucilla saying to the surgeon?"

"I don't know, sir."

"You don't know!"

"I couldn't hear, sir. Miss Lucilla was speaking to him in a whisper."

After that, there was no more to be said. Zillah—disturbed over her domestic occupations and eager to get back to her kitchen—seized the first chance of leaving the room; going out in such a hurry that she forgot to close the door after her. We all looked at each other. To what conclusion did the nurse's strange answers point? It was

plainly impossible for Oscar (no matter how quick his temper might be) to feel jealous of a man of Grosse's age and personal appearance. Still, the prolonged interview between patient and surgeon—after the decision had been pronounced and the trial of the eyes definitely deferred to a future day—had a strange appearance, to say the least of it.

Nugent returned to his place at the window—puzzled, suspicious, deep in his own thoughts. Reverend Finch, swelling with unspoken words, rose portentously from his chair by his wife's side. Had he discovered another chance of inflicting his eloquence on us? It was only too evident that he had! He looked at us with his ominous smile. He addressed us in his biggest voice.

“ My Christian friends——”

Nugent, unassailable by eloquence, persisted in looking out of the window. Oscar, insensible to every earthly consideration except the one consideration of Lucilla, drew me aside unceremoniously out of the rector's hearing. Mr. Finch resumed.

“ My Christian friends, I could wish to say a few appropriate words.”

“ Go to Lucilla !” whispered Oscar, taking me entreatingly by both hands. “ *You* needn’t stand on ceremony with her. Do, do see what is going on in the next room !”

Mr. Finch resumed.

“ The occasion seems to call upon one in my position for a little sustaining advice on Christian duty—I would say, the duty of being cheerful under disappointment.”

Oscar persisted.

“ Do me the greatest of all favours ! Pray find out what is keeping Lucilla with that man !”

Mr. Finch cleared his throat, and lifted his right hand persuasively by way of introduction to his next sentence.

I answered Oscar in a whisper.

“ I don’t like intruding on them. Lucilla told the nurse they were to be left by themselves.”

Just as I said the words, I became aware of a sudden bump against me from behind. I turned, and discovered Jicks with the batter-

ing-ram-doll, preparing for a second plunge at me. She stopped, when she found that she had attracted my attention ; and, taking hold of my dress, tried to pull me out of the room.

“ Remove that child ! ” cried the rector, exasperated by this new interruption.

The child pulled harder and harder at my dress. Something had apparently happened outside the sitting-room which had produced a strong impression on her. Her little round face was flushed ; her bright blue eyes were wide open and staring. “ Jicks wants to speak to you,” she said—and pulled at me impatiently, harder than ever.

I stooped down, with the double purpose of obeying Mr. Finch’s commands and of humouring the child’s whim, by carrying Jicks out of the room, when I was startled by a sound from the bed-chamber—the sound, loud and peremptory, of Lucilla’s voice.

“ Let go of me ! ” she cried. “ I am a woman — I won’t be treated like a child.”

There was a moment of silence—followed

by the rustling sound of her dress, approaching us along the corridor.

Grosse's voice — unmistakably angry and excited—became audible at the same time.
“ No ! Come back ! come back !”

The rustling sound of the dress came nearer.

Nugent and Mr. Finch moved together closer to the door. Oscar caught me by the arm. He and I were on the left-hand side of the door : Nugent and the rector were on the right-hand side. It all happened with the suddenness of a flash of lightning. My heart stood still. I couldn't speak. I couldn't move.

The half-closed door of the sitting-room was burst wide open—roughly, violently, as if a man, not a woman, had been on the other side. (The rector drew back ; Nugent remained where he was.) Wildly groping her way with outstretched arms, as I had never seen her grope it in the time of her blindness, Lucilla staggered into the room. Merciful God ! the bandage was off. The life, the new life of sight, was in her eyes. It transfigured

her face. it irradiated her beauty with an awful and unearthly light. She saw ! she saw !

For an instant, she stopped at the door, swaying to and fro ; giddy under the broad stare of daylight.

She looked at the rector—then at Mrs. Finch, who had followed her husband. She paused bewildered, and put her hands over her eyes. She slightly changed her position ; turned her head, as if to look at me ; turned it back sharply towards the right-hand side of the door again ; and threw up her arms in the air, with a burst of hysterical laughter. The laughter ended in a scream of triumph, which rang through the house. She rushed at Nugent Dubourg, so blindly incapable of measuring her distance that she struck against him violently, and nearly threw him down. “ I know him ! I know him ! ” she cried—and flung her arms round his neck. “ Oh, Oscar ! Oscar ! ” She clasped him to her with all her strength as the name passed her lips, and dropped her head on his bosom in an ecstacy of joy.

It was done before any of us had recovered the use of our senses. The whole horrible scene must have begun and ended in less than half a minute of time. The surgeon, who had run into the room after her, empty-handed, turned suddenly, and left it again ; coming back with the bandage, left forgotten in the bed-room. Grosse was the first among us to recover his presence of mind. He approached her in silence.

She heard him, before he could take her by surprise, and slip the bandage over her eyes. The moment when I turned, horror-struck, to look at Oscar, was also the moment when she lifted her head from Nugent's bosom to look for the surgeon. Her eyes followed the direction taken by mine. They encountered Oscar's face. She saw the blue-black hue of it in full light.

A cry of terror escaped her she started back, shuddering, and caught hold of Nugent's arm. Grosse motioned sternly to him to turn her face from the window ; and lifted the bandage. She clutched at it with feverish eagerness as he held it up. "Put it on again!"

she said, holding by Nugent with one hand, and lifting the other to point towards Oscar with a gesture of disgust. "Put it on again. I have seen too much already."

Grosse fastened the bandage over her eyes, and waited a little. She still held Nugent's arm. The sting of my indignation as I saw it, roused me into doing something. I stepped forward to part them. Grosse stopped me. "No!" he said. "Don't make bad worse." I looked at Oscar for the second time. There he stood, as he had stood from the first moment when she appeared at the door—his eyes staring wildly straight before him; his limbs set and fixed. I went to him, and touched him. He seemed not to feel it. I spoke to him. I might as well have spoken to a man of stone.

Grosse's voice drew my attention, for a moment, the other way.

"Come!" he said, trying to take Lucilla back into her own room.

She shook her head, and tightened her hold on Nugent's arm.

"*You* take me," she whispered. "As far as the door."

I again attempted to stop it ; and again the German put me back.

"Not to-day!" he said sternly. With that, he made a sign to Nugent, and placed himself on Lucilla's other side. In silence, the two men led her out of the room. The door closed on them. It was over.





CHAPTER THE TWELFTH.

THE BROTHERS MEET.

AFAINT sound of crying found its way to my ears from the lower end of the room, and reminded me that the rector and his wife had been present among us. Feeble Mrs. Finch was lying back in her chair, weeping and wailing over what had happened. Her husband, with the baby in his arms, was trying to compose her. I ought perhaps to have offered my help—but, I own, poor Mrs. Finch's distress produced only a passing impression on me. My whole heart was with another person. I forgot the rector and his wife, and went back to Oscar.

This time he moved—he lifted his head

when he saw me. Shall I ever forget the silent misery in that face, the dull dreadful stare in those tearless eyes?

I took his hand—I felt for the poor disfigured, rejected man as his mother might have felt for him—I gave him a mother's kiss. "Be comforted, Oscar," I said. "Trust me to set this right."

He drew a long trembling breath, and pressed my hand gratefully. I attempted to speak to him again—he stopped me by looking suddenly towards the door.

"Is Nugent outside?" he asked in a whisper.

I went into the corridor. It was empty. I looked into Lucilla's room. She and Grosse and the nurse were the only persons in it. I beckoned to Zillah to come out and speak to me. I asked for Nugent. He had left Lucilla abruptly at the bed-room door—he was out of the house. I inquired if it was known in what direction he had gone. Zillah had seen him in the field at the end of the garden, walking away rapidly, with his back to the village, and his face to the hills.

“Nugent has gone,” I said, returning to Oscar.

“Add to your kindness to me,” he answered.
“Let *me* go too.”

A quick fear crossed my mind, that he might be bent on following his brother.

“Wait a little,” I said, “and rest here.”

He shook his head.

“I must be by myself,” he said. After considering a little, he added a question. “Has Nugent gone to Browndown?”

“No. Nugent has been seen walking towards the hills.”

He took my hand again. “Be merciful to me,” he said. “Let me go.”

“Home? To Browndown?”

“Yes.”

“Let me go with you.”

He shook his head. “Forgive me. You shall hear from me later in the day.”

No tears! no flaming-up of the quick temper that I knew so well! Nothing in his face, nothing in his voice, nothing in his manner, but a composure miserable to see—the composure of despair.

"At least, let me accompany you to the gate," I said.

"God bless and reward you!" he answered.
"Let me go."

With a gentle hand—and yet with a firmness which took me completely by surprise—he separated himself from me, and went out.

I could stand no longer—I dropped trembling into a chair. The conviction forced itself on me that there were worse complications, direr misfortunes, still to come. I was almost beside myself—I broke out vehemently with wild words spoken in my own language. Mrs. Finch recalled me to my senses. I saw her as in a dream, drying her tears, and looking at me in alarm. The rector approached, with profuse expressions of sympathy and offers of assistance. I wanted no comforting. I had served a hard apprenticeship to life; I had been well seasoned to trouble. "Thank you, sir," I said. "Look to Mrs. Finch." There was more air in the corridor. I went out again, to walk about, and get the better of it there.

A small object attracted my attention,

crouched up on one of the window seats. The small object was—Jicks.

I suppose the child's instinct must have told her that something had gone wrong. She looked furtively sideways at me, round her doll she had grave doubts of my intentions towards her. “Are you going to whack Jicks?” asked the curious little creature, shrinking into her corner. I sat down by her, and soon recovered my place in her confidence. She began to chatter again as fast as usual. I listened to her as I could have listened to no grown-up person at that moment. In some mysterious way that I cannot explain, the child comforted me. Little by little, I learnt what she had wanted with me, when she had attempted to drag me out of the room. She had seen all that had passed in the bed-chamber; and she had run out to take me back with her, and show me the wonderful sight of Lucilla with the bandage off her eyes. If I had been wise enough to listen to Jicks, I might have prevented the catastrophe that had happened. I might have met Lucilla in the corridor, and

have forced her back into her own room and turned the key on her.

It was too late now to regret what had happened. "Jicks has been good," I said, patting my little friend on the head with a heavy heart. The child listened—considered with herself gravely—got off the window-seat—and claimed her reward for being good, with that excellent brevity of speech which so eminently distinguished her :

"Jicks will go out."

With those words, she shouldered her doll ; and walked off. The last I saw of her, she was descending the stairs as a workman descends a ladder, on her way to the garden—and from the garden (the first time the gate was opened) to the hills. If I could have gone out with her light heart, I would have joined Jicks.

I had hardly lost sight of the child, before the door of Lucilla's room opened, and Herr Grosse appeared in the corridor.

"Soh!" he muttered with a gesture of relief, "the very womans I was looking for. A nice mess-fix we are in now! I must

stop with Feench. (I shall end in hating Feench !) Can you put me into a beds for the night?"

I assured him that he could easily sleep at the rectory. In answer to my inquiries after his patient, he gravely acknowledged that he was anxious about Lucilla. The varying and violent emotions which had shaken her (acting through her nervous system) might produce results which would imperil the recovery of her sight. Absolute repose was not simply necessary—it was now the only chance for her. For the next four-and-twenty hours, he must keep watch over her eyes. At the end of that time—no earlier—he might be able to say whether the mischief done would be fatal to her sight or not. I asked how she had contrived to get her bandage off, and to make her fatal entrance into the sitting-room.

He shrugged his shoulders. "There are times," he said cynically, "when every womans is a hussy, and every mans is a fool. This was one of the times."

It appeared, on further explanation, that

my poor Lucilla had pleaded so earnestly (after the nurse had left the room) to be allowed to try her eyes, and had shown such ungovernable disappointment when he persisted in saying No, that he had yielded—not so much to her entreaties, as to his own conviction that it would be less dangerous to humour her than to thwart her, with such a sensitive and irritable temperament as hers. He had first bargained however, on his side, that she should remain in the bed-chamber, and be content, for that time, with using her sight on the objects round her in the room. She had promised all that he asked—and he had been foolish enough to trust to her promise. The bandage once off, she had instantly set every consideration at defiance—had torn herself out of his hands like a mad creature—and had rushed into the sitting-room before he could stop her. The rest had followed as a matter of course. Feeble as it was at the first trial of it, her sense of sight was sufficiently restored to enable her to distinguish objects dimly. Of the three persons who had offered themselves to view

on the right-hand side of the door, one (Mrs. Finch) was a woman; another (Mr. Finch) was a short, grey-headed, elderly man; the third (Nugent), in his height—which she could see—and in the colour of his hair—which she could see—was the only one of the three who could possibly represent Oscar. The catastrophe that followed was (as things were) inevitable. Now that the harm was done, the one alternative left was to check the mischief at the point which it had already reached. Not the slightest hint at the terrible mistake that she had made must be suffered to reach her ears. If we any of us said one word about it, before he authorised us to do so, he would refuse to answer for the consequences, and would then and there throw up the case.

So, in his broken English, Herr Grosse explained what had happened, and issued his directions for our future conduct.

“No person is to go in to her,” he said, in conclusion, “but you and goot Mrs. Zillahs. You two watch her, turn-about-turn-about. In a whiles, she will sleep. For me, I go to

smoke my tobaccos in the garden. Hear this, Madame Pratolungo. When Gott made the womens, he was sorry afterwards for the poor mens—and he made tobaccos to comfort them."

Favouring me with this peculiar view of the scheme of creation, Herr Grosse shook his shock head, and waddled away to the garden.

I softly opened the bed-room door, and looked in—disappearing just in time to escape the rector and Mrs. Finch returning to their own side of the house.

Lucilla was lying on the sofa. She asked who it was in a drowsy voice—she was happily just sinking into slumber. Zillah occupied a chair near her. I was not wanted for the moment—and I was glad, for the first time in my experience at Dimchurch, to get out of the room again. By some contradiction in my character which I am not able to explain, there was a certain hostile influence in the sympathy that I felt for Oscar, which estranged me, for the moment, from Lucilla. It was not her fault—and yet (I am ashamed to own it) I almost felt angry with her for

reposing so comfortably, when I thought of the poor fellow, without a creature to say a kind word to him, alone at Browndown.

Out again in the corridor, the question faced me :—What was I to do next?

The loneliness of the house was insupportable ; my anxiety about Oscar grew more than I could endure. I put on my hat, and went out.

Having no desire to interfere with Herr Grosse's enjoyment of his pipe, I made my way through the garden as quickly as possible, and found myself in the village again. My uneasiness on the subject of Oscar, was matched by my angry desire to know what Nugent would do. Now that he had worked the very mischief which his brother had foreseen to be possible—the very mischief which it had been Oscar's one object to prevent in asking him to leave Dimchurch—would he take his departure ? would he rid us, at once and for ever, of the sight of him ? The bare idea of the other alternative—I mean, of his remaining in the place—shook me with such an unutterable dread of what

might happen next, that my feet refused to support me. I was obliged, just beyond the village, to sit down by the roadside, and wait till my giddy head steadied itself before I attempted to move again.

After a minute or two, I heard footsteps coming along the road. My heart gave one great leap in me. I thought it was Nugent.

A moment more brought the person in view. It was only Mr. Gootheridge of the village inn, on his way home. He stopped, and took off his hat.

“Tired, ma’am?” he said.

The uppermost idea in my mind found its way somehow, ill as I was, to expression on my lips—in the form of a question addressed to the landlord.

“Do you happen to have seen anything of Mr. Nugent Dubourg?” I asked.

“I saw him not five minutes since, ma’am.”

“Where?”

“Going into Browndown.”

I started up, as if I had been struck or shot. Worthy Mr. Gootheridge stared. I wished him good-day, and went on as fast as

my feet would take me, straight to Brown-down. Had the brothers met in the house ? I turned cold at the bare thought of it—but I still kept on. There was an obstinate resolution in me to part them, which served me in place of courage. Account for it as you may, I was bold and frightened both at the same time. At one moment, I was fool enough to say to myself, “They will kill me.” At another, just as foolishly, I found comfort in the opposite view. “ Bah ! They are gentlemen ; they can’t hurt a woman !”

The servant was standing idling at the front door when I arrived in sight of the house. This, in itself, was unusual. He was a hard-working well-trained man. On other occasions, nobody had ever seen him out of his proper place. He advanced a few steps to meet me. I looked at him carefully. Not the slightest appearance of disturbance was visible in his face.

“ Is Mr. Oscar at home ?” I asked.

“ I beg your pardon, ma’am. Mr. Oscar is at home—but you can’t see him. He and Mr. Nugent are together.”

I rested my hand on the low wall in front of the house, and made a desperate effort to put a calm face on it.

“Surely Mr. Oscar will see *me*.” I said.

“I have Mr. Oscar’s orders, ma’am, to wait at the door, and tell everybody who comes to the house (without exception) that he is engaged.”

The house-door was half open. I listened intently while the man was speaking. If they had been at high words together, I must have heard them in the silence of the lonely hills all round us. I heard nothing.

It was strange, it was inconceivable. At the same time, it relieved me. There they were together, and no harm had come of it, so far.

I left my card—and walked on a little, past the corner of the house wall. As soon as I was out of the servant’s sight, I turned back to the side of the building, and ventured as near as I durst to the window of the sitting-room. Their voices reached me, but not their words. On both sides, the tones were low and confidential. Not a note of anger in

either voice—listen for it as I might! I left the house again, breathless with amazement, and (so rapidly does a woman shift from one emotion to another) burning with curiosity.

After half an hour of aimless wandering in the valley, I returned to the rectory.

Lucilla was still sleeping. I took Zillah's place, and sent her into the kitchen. The landlady of the inn was there to help us with the dinner. But she was hardly equal, single-handed, to the superintendence of such dishes as we had to set before Herr Grosse. It was high time I relieved Zillah if we were to pass successfully through the ordeal of the great surgeon's criticism, as reviewer of all the sauces.

An hour more passed before Lucilla woke. I sent a messenger to Grosse, who appeared enveloped in a halo of tobacco, examined the patient's eyes, felt her pulse, ordered her wine and jelly, filled his monstrous pipe, and gruffly returned to his promenade in the garden.

The day wore on. Mr. Finch came to make inquiries, and then went back to his wife—whom he described as “hysterically irrespon-

sible," and in imminent need of another warm bath. He declined, in his most pathetic manner, to meet the German at dinner. "After what I have suffered, after what I have seen, these banquetings—I would say, these ticklings of the palate—are not to my taste. You mean well, Madame Pratolungo. (Good creature!) But I am not in heart for feasting. Simple fare, by my wife's couch; a few consoling words, in the character of pastor and husband, when the infant is quiet. So my day is laid out. I wish you well. I don't object to your little dinner. Good day! good day!"

A second examination of Lucilla's eyes brought us to the dinner-hour.

At the sight of the table-cloth, Herr Grosse's good humour returned. We two dined together alone—the German sending in selections of his own making from the dishes to Lucilla's room. So far, he said, she had escaped any serious injury. But he still insisted on keeping his patient perfectly quiet, and he refused to answer for anything until the night had passed. As for me, Oscar's con-

tinued silence weighed more and more heavily on my spirits. My past suspense in the darkened room with Lucilla seemed to be a mere trifle by comparison with the keener anxieties which I suffered now. I saw Grosse's eyes glaring discontentedly at me through his spectacles. He had good reason to look at me as he did—I had never before been so stupid and so disagreeable in all my life.

Towards the end of the dinner, there came news from Browndown at last. The servant sent in a message by Zillah, begging me to see him for a moment outside the sitting-room door.

I made my excuses to my guest, and hurried out.

The instant I saw the servant's face, my heart sank. Oscar's kindness had attached the man devotedly to his master. I saw his lips tremble, and his colour come and go, when I looked at him.

“I have brought you a letter, ma'am.”

He handed me a letter addressed to me in Oscar's handwriting.

“How is your master?” I asked.

“Not very well, ma’am, when I saw him last.”

“When you saw him last?”

“I bring sad news, ma’am. There’s a break-up at Browndown.”

“What do you mean? Where is Mr. Oscar?”

“Mr. Oscar has left Dimchurch.”





CHAPTER THE THIRTEENTH.

THE BROTHERS CHANGE PLACES.

LVAINLY believed I had prepared myself for any misfortune that could fall on us. The man's last words dispelled my delusion. My gloomiest forebodings had never contemplated such a disaster as had now happened. I stood petrified, thinking of Lucilla, and looking helplessly at the servant. Try as I might, I was perfectly incapable of speaking to him.

He felt no such difficulty on his side. One of the strangest peculiarities in the humbler ranks of the English people, is the sort of solemn relish which they have for talking of their own misfortunes. To be the objects of a calamity of any kind, seems to raise them in

their own estimations. With a dreary enjoyment of his miserable theme, the servant expatiated on his position as a man deprived of the best of masters ; turned adrift again in the world to seek another service ; hopeless of ever again finding himself in such a situation as he had lost. He roused me at last into speaking to him, by sheer dint of irritating my nerves until I could endure him no longer.

“Has Mr. Oscar gone away alone?” I asked.

“Yes, ma’am, quite alone.”

(What had become of Nugent? I was too much interested in Oscar to be able to put the question, at that moment.)

“When did your master go?” I went on.

“Better than two hours since.”

“Why didn’t I hear of it before?”

“I had Mr. Oscar’s orders not to tell you, ma’am, till this time in the evening.”

Wretched as I was already, my spirits sank lower still when I heard that. The order given to the servant looked like a premeditated design, not only to leave Dimchurch, but also to keep us in ignorance of his whereabouts afterwards.

“Has Mr. Oscar gone to London?” I inquired.

“He hired Gootheridge’s chaise, ma’am, to take him to Brighton. And he told me with his own lips that he had left Browndown never to come back. I know no more of it than that.”

He had left Browndown, never to come back! For Lucilla’s sake, I declined to believe that. The servant was exaggerating, or the servant had misunderstood what had been said to him. The letter in my hand reminded me that I had perhaps needlessly questioned him on matters which his master had confided to my own knowledge only. Before I dismissed him for the night, I made my deferred inquiry on the hateful subject of the other brother.

“Where is Mr. Nugent?”

“At Browndown.”

“Do you mean to say that he is going to stay at Browndown?”

“I don’t know, ma’am, for certain. I see no signs of his meaning to leave; and he has said nothing to that effect.”

I had the greatest difficulty to keep myself from breaking out before the servant. My indignation almost choked me. The best way was to wish him good night. I took the best way—only calling him back (as a measure of caution) to say one last word.

“Have you told anybody at the rectory of Mr. Oscar’s departure?” I asked.

“No, ma’am.”

“Say nothing about it then, as you go out. Thank you for bringing me the letter. Good night.”

Having thus provided against any whisper of what had happened reaching Lucilla’s ears that evening, I returned to Herr’ Grosse to make my excuses, and to tell him (as I honestly could) that I was in sore need of being permitted to retire privately to my own room. I found my illustrious guest putting a plate over the final dish of the dinner, full of the tenderest anxiety to keep it warm on my account.

“Here is a lofely cheese-omelettes,” said Grosse. “Two-thirds of him I have eaten my own self. The odder third I sweat with

anxiety to keep warm for you. Sit down ! sit down ! Every moment he is getting cold."

" I am much obliged to you, Herr Grosse. I have just heard some miserable news——"

" Ach, Gott! don't tell it to me !" the wretch burst out, with a look of consternation. " No miserable news, I pray you, after such a dinner as I have eaten. Let me do my digestions ! My goot-dear-creature, if you lose me let me do my digestions !"

" Will you excuse me, if I leave you to your digestion, and retire to my own room ?"

He rose in a violent hurry, and opened the door for me.

" Yes ! yes ! From the deep bottoms of my heart I excuse you. Goot Madame Prato-lungo, retire ! retire !"

I had barely passed the threshold, before the door was closed behind me. I heard the selfish old brute rub his hands, and chuckle over his success in shutting me and my sorrow both out of the room together.

Just as my hand was on my own door, it occurred to me that I should do well to make sure of not being surprised by Lucilla over the

reading of Oscar's letter. The truth is that I shrank from reading it. In spite of my resolution to disbelieve the servant, the dread was now growing on me that the letter would confirm his statement, and would force it on me as the truth that Oscar had left us never to return. I retraced my steps, and entered Lucilla's room.

I could just see her, by the dim night-light burning in a corner to enable the surgeon or the nurse to find their way to her. She was alone in her favourite little wicker-work chair, with the doleful white bandage over her eyes —to all appearance quite content, busily knitting!

“Don’t you feel lonely, Lucilla?”

She turned her head towards me, and answered in her gayest tones.

“Not in the least. I am quite happy as I am.”

“Why is Zillah not with you?”

“I sent her away.”

“You sent her away?”

“Yes! I couldn’t enjoy myself thoroughly to-night, unless I felt that I was quite alone.

I have seen him, my dear—I have seen him ! How could you possibly think I felt lonely ? I am so inordinately happy that I am obliged to knit to keep myself quiet. If you say much more, I shall get up and dance—I know I shall ! Where is Oscar ? That odious Grosse—no ! it is too bad to talk of the dear old man in that way, after he has given me back my sight. Still it *is* cruel of him to say that I am over-excited, and to forbid Oscar to come and see me to-night. Is Oscar with you, in the next room ? Is he very much disappointed at being parted from me in this way ? Say I am thinking of him—since I have seen him—with such new thoughts!"

"Oscar is not here to-night, my dear."

"No ? then he is at Browndown of course with that poor wretched disfigured brother of his. I have got over my terror of Nugent's hideous face. I am even beginning (though I never liked him, as you know) to pity him, with such a dreadful complexion as that. Don't let us talk about it ! Don't let us talk at all ! I want to go on thinking of Oscar."

She resumed her knitting, and shut herself

up luxuriously in her own happy thoughts. Knowing what I knew, it was nothing less than heart-breaking to see her and hear her. Afraid to trust myself to say another word, I softly closed the door, and charged Zillah (when her mistress rang her bell) to say for me that I was weary after the events of the day, and had gone to rest in my bed-room.

At last, I was alone. At last, I was at the end of my manœuvres to spare myself the miserable necessity of opening Oscar's letter. After first locking my door, I broke the seal, and read the lines which follow.

“KIND AND DEAR FRIEND,—Forgive me: I am going to surprise and distress you. My letter thanks you gratefully; and bids you a last farewell.

“Summon all your indulgence for me. Read these lines to the end—they will tell you what happened after I left the rectory.

“Nothing had been seen of Nugent, when I reached this house. It was not till a quarter of an hour later that I heard his voice at the door, calling to me, and asking if I had come

back. I answered, and he joined me in the sitting-room. Nugent's first words to me were these :—

“‘Oscar, I have come to ask your pardon, and to bid you good-bye.’

“I can give you no idea of the tone in which he said those words : it would have gone straight to your heart, as it went straight to mine. For the moment, I was not able to answer him. I could only offer him my hand. He sighed bitterly, and refused to take it.

“‘I have something still to tell you,’ he said. ‘Wait till you have heard it ; and give me your hand afterwards—if you can.’

“He even refused to take the chair to which I pointed. He distressed me by standing in my presence as if he was my inferior. He said—

“No ! I have need of all my calmness and all my courage. It shakes both to recal what he said to me. I sat down to write this, intending to repeat to you everything that passed between us. Another of my weaknesses ! another of my failures ! The tears come into my eyes again, when my mind attempts to

dwell on the details. I can only tell you the result. My brother's confession may be summed up in three words. Prepare yourself to be startled ; prepare yourself to be grieved.

“Nugent loves her.

“Think of this discovery, falling on me after I had seen my innocent Lucilla's arms round his neck—after my own eyes had shown me how she rejoiced over her first sight of *him* ; how she shuddered at her first sight of *me* ! Need I tell you what I suffered ? No.

“Nugent held out his hand, when he had done—as I had held out mine before he began.

“‘The one atonement I can make to you and to her,’ he said, ‘is never to let either of you set eyes on me again. Shake hands, Oscar ; and let me go.’

“If I had willed it so—so it might have ended. I willed it differently. It has ended differently. Can you guess how ?”

I laid down the letter for a moment. It cut me with such keen regret ; it fired me with such hot rage—that I was within a hair's-breadth of tearing the rest of it up unread,

and trampling it under my feet. I took a turn in the room. I dipped my handkerchief in water, and bound it round my head. In a minute or two I was myself again—I could force my mind away from my poor Lucilla, and return to the letter. It proceeded thus

“ I can write calmly of what I have next to tell you. You shall hear what I have decided, and what I have done.

“ I told Nugent to wait in the room, while I went away, and thought over what he had said to me, by myself. He attempted to resist this. I insisted on his yielding. For the first time in our lives, we changed places. It was I who took the lead, and he who followed. I left him, and went out into the valley alone.

“ The heavenly tranquillity, the comforting solitude helped me. I saw my position and his, in their true light. Before I got back, I had decided (cost me what it might) on myself making the sacrifice to which my brother had offered to submit. For Lucilla’s sake, and for Nugent’s sake, I felt the certain assur-

ance in my own mind that it was *my* duty, and not *his*, to go.

“Don’t blame me; don’t grieve for me. Read the rest. I want you to think of this with my thoughts—to feel about it as I feel at this moment.

“Bearing in mind what Nugent has confessed, and what I have myself seen, have I any right to hold Lucilla to her engagement? I am firmly persuaded that I have no right. After inspiring her with terror and disgust at the moment when her eyes first looked at me; after seeing her innocently happy in Nugent’s arms—how, in God’s name, can I claim her as mine? Our marriage has become an impossibility. For her own sake, I cannot, I dare not, appeal to our engagement. The wreck of *my* happiness is nothing. The wreck of *her* happiness would be a crime. I absolve her from her engagement. She is free.

“There is my duty towards Lucilla—as I see it.

“As to Nugent next. I owe it entirely to my brother (at the time of the Trial) that the

honour of our family has been saved, and that I have escaped a shameful death on the scaffold. Is there any limit to the obligation that he has laid on me, after doing me such a service as this? There is no limit. The man who loves Lucilla and the brother who has saved my life are one. I am bound to leave him free—I do leave him free—to win Lucilla by open and loyal means, if he can. As soon as Herr Grosse considers that she is fit to bear the disclosure, let her be told of the error into which she has fallen (through my fault)—let her read these lines, purposely written to meet her eye as well as yours—and let my brother tell her afterwards what has passed to-night in this house between himself and me. She loves him now, believing him to be Oscar. Will she love him still, after she has learnt to know him under his own name? The answer to that question rests with Time. If it is an answer in Nugent's favour, I have already arranged to set aside from my income a sufficient yearly sum to place my brother in a position to begin his married life. I wish to leave his genius free

to assert itself, untrammelled by pecuniary cares. Possessing, as I do, far more than enough for my own simple wants, I can dedicate my spare money to no better and nobler use than this.

“There is my duty towards Nugent—as I see it.

“What I have decided on you now know. ‘What I have done can be told in two words. I have left Browndown for ever. I have gone, to live or die (as God pleases) under the blow that has fallen on me, far away from you all.

“Perhaps, when years have passed, and when their children are growing up round them, I may see Lucilla again, and may take as the hand of my sister, the hand of the beloved woman who might once have been my wife. This may happen, if I live. If I die, you will none of you know it. My death shall not cast its shadow of sadness on their lives. Forgive me and forget me; and keep, as I keep, that first and noblest of all mortal hopes—the hope of the life to come.

“I enclose, when there is need for you to

write to me, the address of my bankers in London. They will have their instructions. If you love me, if you pity me, abstain from attempting to shake my resolution. You may distress me—but you will never change me. Wait to write, until Nugent has had the opportunity of pleading his own cause, and Lucilla has decided on her future life.

“Once more, I thank you for the kindness which has borne with my weaknesses and my follies. God bless you—and good-bye.

“OSCAR.”

Of the effect which the first reading of this letter produced on me, I shall say nothing. Even at this distance of time, I shrink from reviving the memory of what I suffered, alone in my room on that miserable night. Let it be enough if I tell you briefly at what decision I arrived.

I determined on doing two things. First, on going to London by the earliest train the next morning, and finding my way to Oscar by means of his bankers. Secondly, on taking measures for preventing the villain

who had accepted the sacrifice of his brother's happiness from entering the rectory in my absence.

The one comfort I had, that night, was in feeling that, on these two points, my mind was made up. There was a stimulant in my sense of my own resolution which strengthened me to make my excuses to Lucilla, without betraying the grief that tortured me when I found myself in her presence again. Before I went to my bed, I had left her quiet and happy; I had arranged with Herr Grosse that he was still to keep his excitable patient secluded from visitors all through the next day; and I had secured as an ally to help me in preventing Nugent from entering the house, no less a person than Reverend Finch himself. I saw him in his study overnight, and told him all that had happened; keeping one circumstance only concealed — namely, Oscar's insane determination to share his fortune with his infamous brother. I purposely left the rector to suppose that Oscar had led Lucilla free to receive the addresses of a man who had dissipated his fortune to

the last farthing. Mr. Finch's harangue when this prospect was brought within his range of contemplation, was something to be remembered, but not (on this occasion) to be reported—in mercy to the Church.

By the train of the next morning, I left for London.

By the train of the same evening, I returned alone to Dimchurch ; having completely failed to achieve the purpose which had taken me to the metropolis.

Oscar had appeared at the bank as soon as the doors were opened in the morning ; had drawn out some hundreds of pounds in circular notes ; had told the bankers that they should be furnished with an address at which they could write to him, in due course of time ; and had departed for the Continent, without leaving a trace behind him.

I spent the day in making what arrangements I could for discovering him by the usual methods of inquiry pursued in such cases ; and took the return train to the country, with my mind alternating between despair when I thought of Lucilla, and anger

when I thought of the twin-brothers. In the first bitterness of my disappointment, I was quite as indignant with Oscar as with Nugent. With all my heart I cursed the day which had brought the one and the other to Dimchurch.

As we lengthened our distance from London, flying smoothly by the tranquil woods and fields, my mind, with time to help it, began to recover its balance. Little by little, the unexpected revelation of firmness and decision in Oscar's conduct—heartily as I still deplored and blamed that conduct—began to have a new effect on my mind. I now looked back, in amazement and self-reproach, at my own superficial estimate of the characters of the twin-brothers.

Thinking it over uninterruptedly, with no one in the carriage but myself, I arrived at a conclusion which strongly influenced my conduct in guiding Lucilla through the troubles and perils that were still to come.

Our physical constitutions have, as I take it, more to do with the actions which determine other people's opinions of us (as well as

with the course of our own lives) than we generally suppose. A man with delicately-strung nerves says and does things which often lead us to think more meanly of him than he deserves. It is his great misfortune constantly to present himself at his worst. On the other hand, a man provided with nerves vigorously constituted, is provided also with a constitutional health and hardihood which express themselves brightly in his manners, and which lead to a mistaken impression that his nature is what it appears to be on the surface. Having good health, he has good spirits. Having good spirits, he wins as an agreeable companion on the persons with whom he comes in contact—although he may be hiding all the while, under an outer covering which is physically wholesome, an inner nature which is morally diseased. In the last of these typical men, I saw reflected—Nugent. In the first—Oscar. All that was feeblest and poorest in Oscar's nature had shown itself on the surface in past times, to the concealment of its stronger and its nobler side. There had been something

hidden in this super-sensitive man, who had shrunk under all the small trials of his life in our village, which had proved firm enough, when the greatness of the need called on it, to sustain the terrible disaster that had fallen on him. The nearer I got to the end of my journey, the more certain I felt that I was only now learning (bitterly as he had disappointed me) to estimate Oscar's character at its true value. Inspired by this conviction, I began already to face our hopeless prospects boldly. As long as I had life and strength to help her, I determined that Lucilla should *not* lose the man, whose best qualities I had failed to discover until he had made up his mind to turn his back on her for ever.

When I reached the rectory, I was informed that Mr. Finch wished to speak to me. My anxiety about Lucilla made me unwilling to submit to any delay in seeing her. I sent a message, informing the rector that I would be with him in a few minutes—and ran upstairs into Lucilla's room.

“Has it been a very long day, my dear?” I asked, when our first greetings were over.

"It has been a delightful day," she answered joyously. "Grosse took me out for a walk, before he went back to London. Can you guess where our walk led us?"

A chilly sense of misgiving seized me. I drew back from her. I looked at her lovely face without the slightest admiration of it—worse still, with downright distrust of it.

"Where did you go?" I asked.

"To Browndown, of course!"

An exclamation escaped me—"Infamous Grosse," spit out between my teeth in my own language). I could *not* help it. I should have died if I had repressed it—I was in such a rage.

Lucilla laughed. "There! there! It was my fault; I insisted on speaking to Oscar. As soon as I had my own way, I behaved perfectly. I never asked to have the bandage taken off; I was satisfied with only speaking to him. Dear old Grosse—he isn't half as hard on me as you and my father—was with us, all the time. It has done me so much good. Don't be sulky about it, you darling Pratolungo! My 'surgeon-optic' sanctions

my imprudence. I won't ask you to go with me to Browndown to-morrow; Oscar is coming to return my visit."

Those last words decided me. I had had a weary time of it since the morning; but (for me) the day was not at an end yet. I said to myself, "I will have it out with Mr. Nugent Dubourg, before I go to my bed to-night!"

"Can you spare me for a little while?" I asked. "I must go to the other side of the house. Your father wishes to speak to me."

Lucilla started. "About what?" she inquired eagerly.

"About business in London," I answered—and left her, before her curiosity could madden me (in the state I was in at that moment) with more questions.

I found the rector prepared to favour me with his usual flow of language. Fifty Mr. Finches could not have possessed themselves of my attention in the humour I was in at that moment. To the reverend gentleman's amazement, it was I who began—and not he.

“ I have just left Lucilla, Mr. Finch. I know what has happened.”

“ Wait a minute, Madame Pratolungo ! One thing is of the utmost importance to begin with. Do you thoroughly understand that *I* am, in no sense of the word, to blame——?”

“ Thoroughly,” I interposed. “ Of course, they would not have gone to Browndown, if you had consented to let Nugent Dubourg into the house.”

“ Stop !” said Mr. Finch, elevating his right hand. “ My good creature, you are in a state of hysterical precipitation. I *will* be heard ! I did more than refuse my consent. When the man Grosse—I insist on your composing yourself—when the man Grosse came and spoke to me about it, I did more, I say, infinitely more, than refuse my consent. You know my force of language. Don’t be alarmed ! I said, ‘Sir ! As pastor and parent, My Foot is down——’ ”

“ I understand, Mr. Finch. Whatever you said to Herr Grosse was quite useless ; he entirely ignored your personal point of view.”

“ Madame Pratolungo—— !”

“ He found Lucilla dangerously agitated by her separation from Oscar : he asserted, what he calls, his professional freedom of action.”

“ Madame Pratolungo——!”

“ You persisted in closing your doors to Nugent Dubourg. *He* persisted, on his side—and took Lucilla to Browndown.”

Mr. Finch got on his feet, and asserted himself at the full pitch of his tremendous voice.

“ Silence!” he shouted, with a smack of his open hand on the table at his side.

I didn’t care. *I* shouted. *I* came down, with a smack of *my* hand, on the opposite side of the table.

“ One question, sir; before I leave you,” I said. “ Since your daughter went to Browndown, you have had many hours at your disposal. Have you seen Mr. Nugent Dubourg?”

The Pope of Dimchurch suddenly collapsed, in full fulmination of his domestic Bulls.

“ Pardon me,” he replied, adopting his most elaborately polite manner. “ This requires considerable explanation.”

I declined to wait for considerable explanation. “ You have *not* seen him ? ” I said.

“ I have *not* seen him, ” echoed Mr. Finch. “ My position towards Nugent Dubourg is very remarkable, Madame Pratolungo. In my parental character, I should like to wring his neck. In my clerical character, I feel it incumbent on me to pause—and write to him. You feel the responsibility ? You understand the distinction ? ”

I understood that he was afraid. Answering him by an inclination of the head (I hate a coward !) I walked silently to the door.

Mr. Finch returned my bow with a look of helpless perplexity. “ Are you going to leave me ? ” he inquired blandly.

“ I am going to Browndown.”

If I had said that I was going to a place which the rector had frequent occasion to mention in the stronger passages of his sermons, Mr. Finch’s face could hardly have shown more astonishment and alarm than it exhibited when I replied to him in those terms. He lifted his persuasive right hand ;

he opened his eloquent lips. Before the coming overflow of language could reach me, I was out of the room, on my way to Brown-down.





CHAPTER THE FOURTEENTH.

IS THERE NO EXCUSE FOR HIM ?

SCAR'S dismissed servant (left, during the usual month of warning, to take care of the house) opened the door to me when I knocked. Although the hour was already a late one in primitive Dimchurch, the man showed no signs of surprise at seeing me.

"Is Mr. Nugent Dubourg at home?"

"Yes, ma'am." He lowered his voice, and added, "I think Mr. Nugent expected to see you to-night."

Whether he intended it, or not, the servant had done me a good turn—he had put me on my guard. Nugent Dubourg understood my character better than I had understood his.

He had foreseen what would happen, when I heard of Lucilla's visit on my return to the rectory—and he had, no doubt, prepared himself accordingly. I was conscious of a certain nervous trembling (I own) as I followed the servant to the sitting-room. At the moment, however, when he opened the door, this ignoble sensation left me as suddenly as it had come. I felt myself Pratolungo's widow again, when I entered the room.

A reading-lamp, with its shade down, was the only light on the table. Nugent Dubourg, comfortably reposing in an easy chair, sat by the lamp, with a cigar in his mouth, and a book in his hand. He put down the book on the table as he rose to receive me. Knowing, by this time, what sort of man I had to deal with, I was determined not to let even the merest trifles escape me. It might have its use in helping me to understand him, if I knew how he had been occupying his mind while he was expecting me to arrive. I looked at the book. It was *Rossean's Confessions*.

He advanced with his pleasant smile, and

offered his hand as if nothing had happened to disturb our ordinary relations towards each other. I drew back a step, and looked at him.

“Won’t you shake hands with me?” he asked.

“I will answer that directly,” I said.
“Where is your brother?”

“I don’t know.”

“When you *do* know, Mr. Nugent Dubourg, and when you have brought your brother back to this house, I will take your hand—not before.”

He bowed resignedly, with a little satirical shrug of his shoulders, and asked if he might offer me a chair.

I took a chair for myself, and placed it so that I might be opposite to him when he resumed his seat. He checked himself in the act of sitting down, and looked towards the open window.

“Shall I throw away my cigar?” he said.

“Not on my account. I have no objection to smoking.”

“Thank you.” He took his chair—keep-

ing his face in the partial obscurity cast by the shade of the lamp. After smoking for a moment, he spoke again, without turning to look at me. "May I ask what your object is in honouring me with this visit?"

"I have two objects. The first is to see that you leave Dimchurch to-morrow morning. The second is to make you restore your brother to his promised wife."

He looked round at me quickly. His experience of my irritable temper had not prepared him for the perfect composure of voice and manner with which I answered his question. He looked back again from me to his cigar, and knocked off the ash at the tip of it (considering with himself) before he addressed his next words to me.

"We will come to the question of my leaving Dimchurch presently," he said. "Have you received a letter from Oscar?"

"Yes."

"Have you read it?"

"I have read it."

"Then you know that we understand each other?"

“I know that your brother has sacrificed himself—and that you have taken a base advantage of the sacrifice.”

He started, and looked round at me once more. I saw that something in my language, or in my tone of speaking, had stung him.

“You have your privilege as a lady,” he said. “Don’t push it too far. What Oscar has done, he has done of his own free will.”

“What Oscar has done,” I rejoined, “is lamentably foolish, cruelly wrong. Still, perverted as it is, there is something generous, something noble, in the motive which has led *him*. As for your conduct in this matter, I see nothing but what is mean, nothing but what is cowardly, in the motive which has led *you*.”

He started to his feet, and flung his cigar into the empty fire-place.

“Madame Pratolungo,” he said, “I have not the honour of knowing anything of your family. I can’t call a woman to account for insulting me. Do you happen to have any *man* related to you, in or out of England?”

“I happen to have what will do equally

well on this occasion," I replied. "I have a hearty contempt for threats of all sorts, and a steady resolution in me to say what I think."

He walked to the door, and opened it.

"I decline to give you the opportunity of saying anything more," he rejoined. "I beg to leave you in possession of the room, and to wish you good evening."

He opened the door. I had entered the house, armed in my own mind with a last desperate resolve, only to be communicated to him, or to anybody, in the final emergency and at the eleventh hour. The time had come for saying what I had hoped with my whole heart to have left unsaid.

I rose on my side, and stopped him as he was leaving the room.

"Return to your chair and your book," I said. "Our interview is at an end. In leaving the house, I have one last word to say. You are wasting your time in remaining at Dimchurch."

"I am the best judge of that," he answered, making way for me to go out.

"Pardon me, you are not in a position to

judge at all. You don't know what I mean to do as soon as I get back to the rectory."

He instantly changed his position ; placing himself in the doorway so as to prevent me from leaving the room.

"What do you mean to do?" he asked, keeping his eyes attentively fixed on mine.

"I mean to force you to leave Dimchurch."

He laughed insolently. I went on as quietly as before. "You have personated your brother to Lucilla this morning," I said. "You have done that, Mr. Nugent Dubourg, for the last time."

"Have I? Who will prevent me from doing it again?"

"I will."

This time, he took it seriously.

"You?" he said. "How are *you* to control me, if you please?"

"I can control you through Lucilla. When I get back to the rectory, I can, and will, tell Lucilla the truth."

He started—and instantly recovered himself.

"You forget something, Madame Prato-

lungo. You forget what the surgeon in attendance on her has told us."

"I remember it perfectly. If we say or do anything to agitate his patient, in her present state, the surgeon refuses to answer for the consequences."

"Well?"

"Well—between the alternative of leaving you free to break both their hearts, and the alternative of setting the surgeon's warning at defiance—dreadful as the choice is, my choice is made. I tell you to your face, I would rather see Lucilla blind again than see her your wife."

His estimate of the strength of the position on his side, had been necessarily based on one conviction—the conviction that Grosse's professional authority would tie my tongue. I had scattered his calculations to the winds. He turned so deadly pale that, dim as the light was, I could see the change in his face.

"I don't believe you!" he said.

"Present yourself at the rectory to-morrow," I answered—"and you will see. I have no more to say to you. Let me by."

You may suppose I was only trying to frighten him. I was doing nothing of the sort. Blame me, or approve of me, as you please, I was expressing the resolution which I had in my mind when I spoke. Whether my courage would have held out through the walk from Browndown to the rectory—whether I should have shrunk from it when I actually found myself in Lucilla's presence—is more than I can venture to decide. All I say is that I did, in my desperation, positively mean doing it, at the moment when I threatened to do it—and that Nugent Dubourg heard something in my voice which told him I was in earnest.

“You fiend!” he burst out, stepping close up to me with a look of fury.

The whole passionate fervour of the love that the miserable wretch felt for her, shook him from head to foot, as his horror of me found its way to expression in those two words.

“Spare me your opinion of my character,” I said. “I don't expect *you* to understand the motives of an honest woman. For the last time, let me by!”

Instead of letting me by, he locked the door, and put the key in his pocket. That done, he pointed to the chair that I had left.

“Sit down,” he said, with a sudden sinking in his voice which implied a sudden change in his temper. “Let me have a minute to myself.”

I returned to my place. He took his own chair on the other side of the table, and covered his face with his hands. We waited awhile in silence. I looked at him, once or twice, as the minutes followed each other. The shaded lamp-light glistened dimly on something between his fingers. I rose softly, and stretched across the table to look closer. Tears! On my word of honour, tears forcing their way through his fingers, as he held them over his face! I had been on the point of speaking. I sat down again in silence.

“Say what you want of me. Tell me what you wish me to do.”

Those were his first words. He spoke them without moving his hands; so quietly, so sadly, with such hopeless sorrow, such uncomplaining resignation in his voice, that I, who

had entered that room, hating him, rose again, and went round to his chair. I—who a minute ago, if I had had the strength, would have struck him down on the floor at my feet—laid my hand on his shoulder, pitying him from the bottom of my heart. That is what women are! There is a specimen of their sense, firmness, and self-control!

“Be just, Nugent,” I said. “Be honourable. Be all that I once thought you. I want no more.”

He dropped his arms on the table: his head fell on them, and he burst into a fit of crying. It was so like his brother, that I could almost have fancied I, too, had mistaken one of them for the other. “Oscar over again,” I thought to myself, “on the first day when I spoke to him in this very room!”

“Come!” I said, when he was quieter. “We shall end in understanding each other and respecting each other after all.”

He irritably shook my hand off his shoulder, and turned his face away from the light.

“Don’t talk of understanding *me*,” he said. “Your sympathy is for Oscar. He is the

victim ; he is the martyr ; he has all your consideration and all your pity. I am a coward ; I am a villain ; I have no honour and no heart. Tread Me under foot like a reptile. *My* misery is only what I deserve ! Compassion is thrown away—isn't it ?—on such a scoundrel as I am ?"

I was sorely puzzled how to answer him. All that he had said against himself, I had thought of him in my own mind. And why not ? He *had* behaved infamously—he *was* a fit object for righteous indignation. And yet—and yet—it is sometimes so very hard, however badly a man may have behaved, for women to hold out against forgiving him, when they know that a woman is at the bottom of it.

" Whatever I may have thought of you," I said, " it is still in your power, Nugent, to win back my old regard for you."

" Is it ?" he answered scornfully. " I know better than that. You are not talking to Oscar now—you are talking to a man who has had some experience of women. I know how you all hold to your opinions because

they *are* your opinions—without asking yourselves whether they are right or wrong. There are men who could understand me and pity me. No woman can do it. The best and cleverest among you don't know what love is—as a man feels it. It isn't the frenzy with You that it is with Us. It acknowledges restraints in a woman—it bursts through everything in a man. It robs him of his intelligence, his honour, his self-respect—it levels him with the brutes—it debases him into idiocy—it lashes him into madness. I tell you I am not accountable for my own actions. The kindest thing you could do for me would be to shut me up in a madhouse. The best thing I could do for myself would be to cut my throat.—Oh, yes! this is a shocking way of talking, isn't it? I ought to struggle against it—as you say. I ought to summon my self-control. Ha! ha! ha! Here is a clever woman—here is an experienced woman. And yet—though she has seen me in Lucilla's company hundreds of times—she has never once discovered the signs of a struggle in me! From the moment when I first saw that hea-

venly creature, it has been one long fight against myself, one infernal torment of shame and remorse ; and this clever friend of mine has observed so little and knows so little, that she can only view my conduct in one light—it is the conduct of a coward and a villain!"

He got up, and took a turn in the room. I was—naturally, I think—a little irritated by his way of putting it. A man assuming to know more about love than a woman ! Was there ever such a monstrous perversion of the truth as that ? I appeal to the women !

" You ought to be the last person to blame me," I said. " I had too high an opinion of you to suspect what was going on. I will never make the same mistake again—I promise you that!"

He came back, and stood still in front of me, looking me hard in the face.

" Do you really mean to say you saw nothing to set you thinking, on the day when I first met her ?" he asked. " You were there in the room—didn't you see that she struck me dumb ? Did you notice nothing suspicious at a later time ? When I was suffering martyr-

dom, if I only looked at her—was there nothing to be seen in me which told its own tale?"

"I noticed that you were never at your ease with her," I replied. "But I liked you and trusted you—and I failed to understand it. That's all."

"Did you fail to understand everything that followed? Didn't I speak to her father? Didn't I try to hasten Oscar's marriage?"

It was true. He *had* tried.

"When we first talked of his telling Lucilla of the discolouration of his face, did I not agree with you that he ought to put himself right with her, in his own interests?"

True again. Impossible to deny that he had sided with my view.

"When she all but found it out for herself, whose influence was used to make him own it? Mine! What did I do, when he tried to confess it, and failed to make her understand him? what did I do when she first committed the mistake of believing *me* to be the disfigured man?"

The audacity of that last question fairly

took away my breath. "You cruelly helped to deceive her," I answered indignantly. "You basely encouraged your brother in his fatal policy of silence."

He looked at me with an angry amazement on his side which more than equalled the angry amazement on mine.

"So much for the delicate perception of a woman!" he exclaimed. "So much for the wonderful tact which is the peculiar gift of the sex! You can see no motive but a bad motive in my sacrificing myself for Oscar's sake?"

I began to discern faintly that there might have been another than a bad motive for his conduct. But—well! I dare say I was wrong; I resented the tone he was taking with me; I would have owned I had made a mistake to anybody else in the world; I wouldn't own it to *him*. There!

"Look back for one moment," he resumed, in quieter and gentler tones. "See how hardly you have judged me! I seized the opportunity—I swear to you this is true—I seized the opportunity of making myself an

object of horror to her, the moment I heard of the mistake that she had made. I felt in myself that I was growing less and less capable of avoiding her, and I caught at the chance of making *her* avoid *me*; I did that—and I did more! I entreated Oscar to let me leave Dimchurch. He appealed to me, in the name of our love for each other, to remain. I couldn't resist him. Where do you see signs of the conduct of a scoundrel in all this? Would a scoundrel have betrayed himself to you a dozen times over—as I did in that talk of ours in the summer-house? I remember saying in so many words, I wished I had never come to Dimchurch. What reason but one could there be for my saying that? How is it that you never even asked me what I meant?"

" You forget," I interposed, " that I had no opportunity of asking you. Lucilla interrupted us, and diverted my attention to other things. What do you mean by putting me on my defence in this way?" I went on, more and more irritated by the tone he was

taking with me. "What right have you to judge my conduct?"

He looked at me with a kind of vacant surprise.

"*Have I been judging your conduct?*" he asked.

"Yes."

"Perhaps I was thinking, if you had seen my infatuation in time you might have checked it in time. No!" he exclaimed, before I could answer him. "Nothing could have checked it—nothing will cure it but my death. Let us try to agree. I beg your pardon if I have offended you. I am willing to take a just view of your conduct. Will you take a just view of mine?"

I tried hard to take a just view. Though I resented his manner of speaking to me, I nevertheless secretly felt for him, as I have confessed. Still I could not forget that he had attempted to attract to himself Lucilla's first look, on the day when she tried her sight—that he had personated his brother to Lucilla that very morning—that he had suffered his brother to go away heart-broken, a volun-

tary exile from all that he held dear. No! I could feel for him, but I could *not* take a just view of him. I sat down, and said nothing.

He returned to the question between us; treating me with the needful politeness, when he spoke next. For all that, he alarmed me, by what he now said, as he had not alarmed me yet.

“I repeat what I have already told you,” he proceeded. “I am no longer accountable for what I do. If I know anything of myself, I believe it will be useless to trust me in the future. While I am capable of speaking the truth, let me tell it. Whatever happens at a later time—remember this, I have honestly made a clean breast of it to-night.”

“Stop!” I cried. “I don’t understand your reckless way of talking. Every man is accountable for what he does.”

He checked me there by an impatient wave of his hand.

“Keep your opinion; I don’t dispute it. You will see; you will see.—Madame Pratolungo, the day when we had that private talk of ours in the rectory summer-house, marks a

memorable date in my calendar. My last honest struggle to be true to my poor Oscar ended with that day. The efforts I have made since then have been little better than mere outbreaks of despair. They have done nothing to help me against the passion that has become the one feeling and the one misery of my life. Don't talk of resistance. All resistance stops at a certain point. Since the time I have told you of, *my* resistance has reached its limits. You have heard how I struggled against temptation, as long as I could resist it. I have only to tell you how I have yielded to it now."

The reckless, shameless composure with which he said that, began to set me against him once more. The perpetual shifts and contradictions in him, bewildered and irritated me. Quicksilver itself seemed to be less slippery to lay hold of than this man.

"Do you remember the day," he asked, "when Lucilla lost her temper, and received you so rudely at your visit to Browndown?"

I made a sign in the affirmative.

"You spoke, a little while since, of my

personating Oscar to her. I personated him, on the occasion I have just mentioned, for the first time. You were present and heard me. Did you care to speculate on the motives which made me impose myself on her as my brother?"

"As well as I can remember," I answered, "I made the first guess that occurred to me. I thought you were indulging in a moment's mischievous amusement at Lucilla's expense."

"I was indulging the passion that consumed me! I longed to feel the luxury of her touching me and being familiar with me, under the impression that I was Oscar. Worse even than that, I wanted to try how completely I could impose on her—how easily I might marry her, if I could only deceive you all, and take her away somewhere by herself. The devil was in possession of me. I don't know how it might have ended, if Oscar had not come in, and if Lucilla had not burst out as she did. She distressed me—she frightened me—she gave me back again to my better self. I rushed, without

stopping to prepare her, into the question of her restoration to sight—as the only way of diverting her mind from the vile advantage that I had taken of her blindness. That night, Madame Pratolungo, I suffered pangs of self-reproach and remorse which would even have satisfied *you*. At the very next opportunity that offered, I made my atonement to Oscar. I supported his interests; I even put the words he was to say to Lucilla into his lips——”

“ When ?” I broke in. “ Where ? How ?”

“ When the two surgeons had left us. In Lucilla’s sitting-room. In the heat of the discussion whether she should submit to the operation at once—or whether she should marry Oscar first, and let Grosse try his experiment on her eyes at a later time. If you recal our conversation, you will remember that I did all I could to persuade Lucilla to marry my brother, before Grosse tried his experiment on her sight. Quite useless ! You threw all the weight of your influence into the opposite side of the scale. I failed. It made no difference. I had done what I

had done in sheer despair mere impulse—it didn't last. When the next temptation tried me, I behaved like a scoundrel—as you say."

"I have said nothing," I answered shortly.

"Very well—as you *think*, then. Did you suspect me at last—when we met in the village yesterday? Surely, even your eyes must have seen through me on that occasion!"

I answered silently by an inclination of my head. I had no wish to drift into another quarrel. Sorely as he was presuming on my endurance, I tried, in Lucilla's interests, to keep on friendly terms with him.

"You concealed it wonderfully well," he went on, "when I tried to find out whether you had, or had not discovered me. You virtuous people are not bad hands at deception, when it suits your interests to deceive. I needn't tell you what my temptation was yesterday. The first look of her eyes when they opened on the world; the first light of love and joy breaking on her heavenly face—what madness to expect me to let that look fall on another man, that light show itself to

other eyes! No living being, adoring her as I adored her, would have acted otherwise than I did. I could have fallen down on my knees and worshipped Grosse, when he innocently proposed to me to take the very place in the room which I was determined to occupy. You saw what I had in my mind! You did your best—and did it admirably—to defeat me. Oh, you pattern people—you can be as shifty with your resources, when a cunning trick is to be played, as the worst of us! You saw how it ended. Fortune stood my friend at the eleventh hour; fortune can shine, like the sun, on the just and the unjust! *I* had the first look of her eyes! *I* felt the first light of love and joy in her face falling on *me*! *I* have had her arms round me, and her bosom on mine——”

I could endure it no longer.

“Open the door!” I said. “I am ashamed to be in the same room with you!”

“I don’t wonder at it,” he answered. “You may well be ashamed of me. I am ashamed of myself.”

There was nothing cynical in his tone,

nothing insolent in his manner. The same man who had just gloried, in that abominable way, in his victory over innocence and misfortune, now spoke and looked like a man who was honestly ashamed of himself. If I could only have felt convinced that he was mocking me, or playing the hypocrite with me, I should have known what to do. But I say again—impossible as it seems—he was, beyond all doubt, genuinely penitent for what he had said, the instant after he had said it! With all my experience of humanity, and all my practice in dealing with strange characters, I stopped midway between Nugent and the locked door, thoroughly puzzled.

“Do you believe me?” he asked.

“I don’t understand you,” I answered.

He took the key of the door out of his pocket, and put it on the table—close to the chair from which I had just risen.

“I lose my head when I talk of her, or think of her,” he went on. “I would give everything I possess not to have said what I said just now. No language you can use is too strong to condemn it. The words burst

out of me : if Lucilla herself had been present, I couldn't have controlled them. Go, if you like. I have no right to keep you here, after behaving as I have done. There is the key, at your service. Only think first, before you leave me. You had something to propose when you came in. You might influence me —you might shame me into behaving like an honourable man. Do as you please. It rests with you."

Which was I, a good Christian? or a contemptible fool? I went back once more to my chair, and determined to give him a last chance.

"That's kind," he said. "You encourage me; you show me that I am worth trying again. I had a generous impulse in this room, yesterday. It might have been something better than an impulse—if I had not had another temptation set straight in my way."

"What temptation?" I asked.

"Oscar's letter has told you : Oscar himself put the temptation in my way. You must have seen it."

"I saw nothing of the sort."

“ Doesn’t he tell you that I offered to leave Dimchurch for ever ? I meant it. I saw the misery in the poor fellow’s face, when Grosse and I were leading Lucilla out of the room. With my whole heart, I meant it. If he had taken my hand, and had said Good-bye, I should have gone. He wouldn’t take my hand. He insisted on thinking it over by himself. He came back, resolved to make the sacrifice, on his side——”

“ Why did you accept the sacrifice ?”

“ Because he tempted me.”

“ Tempted you ?”

“ Yes ! What else can you call it—when he offered to leave me free to plead my own cause with Lucilla ? What else can you call it—when he showed me a future life, which was a life with Lucilla ? Poor, dear, generous fellow, he tempted me to stay when he ought to have encouraged me to go. How could I resist him ? Blame the passion that has got me body and soul : don’t blame *me* !”

I looked at the book on the table—the book that he had been reading when I entered the room. These sophistical confidences of his

were nothing but Rousseau at second hand. Good ! If he talked false Rousseau, nothing was left for me but to talk genuine Pratolungo. I let myself go—I was just in the humour for it.

“ How can a clever man like you impose on yourself in that way ! ” I said. “ Your future with Lucilla ? You have no future with Lucilla which is not shocking to think of. Suppose—you shall never do it, as long as I live—suppose you married her ? Good heavens, what a miserable life it would be for both of you ! You love your brother. Do you think you could ever really know a moment’s peace, with one reflection perpetually forcing itself on your mind ? ‘ I have cheated Oscar out of the woman whom he loved ; I have wasted his life ; I have broken his heart.’ You couldn’t look at her, you couldn’t speak to her, you couldn’t touch her, without feeling it all embittered by that horrible reproach. And she ? What sort of wife would she make you, when she knew how you had got her ? I don’t know which of the two she would hate most—you or herself. Not a man would pass

her in the street, who would not rouse the thought in her—‘I wonder whether *he* has ever done anything as base as what my husband has done.’ Not a married woman of her acquaintance, but would make her sick at heart with envy and regret. ‘Whatever faults he may have, your husband hasn’t won you as my husband won me.’ You happy? Your married life endurable? Come! I have saved a few pounds, since I have been with Lucilla. I will lay you every farthing I possess, you two would be separated by mutual consent before you had been six months man and wife. *Now*, which will you do? Will you start for the Continent, or stay here? Will you bring Oscar back, like an honourable man, or let him go, and disgrace yourself for ever?’

His eyes sparkled; his colour rose. He sprang to his feet, and unlocked the door. What was he going to do? To start for the Continent, or to turn me out of the house?

He called to the servant.

“James!”

“Yes, sir?”

“Make the house fast when Madame Pra-

tolungo and I have left it. I am not coming back again."

"Sir!"

"Pack my portmanteau, and send it after me to-morrow, to Nagle's Hotel, London."

He closed the door again, and came back to me.

"You refused to take my hand when you came in," he said. "Will you take it now? I leave Browndown when you leave it; and I won't come back again till I bring Oscar with me."

"Both hands!" I exclaimed—and took him by both hands. I could say nothing more. I could only wonder whether I was waking or sleeping; fit to be put into an asylum, or fit to go at large?

"Come!" he said. "I will see you as far as the rectory gate."

"You can't go to-night," I answered. "The last train has left hours since."

"I can! I can walk to Brighton, and get a bed there, and leave for London to-morrow morning. Nothing will induce me to pass

another night at Browndown. Stop! One question before I put the lamp out."

"What is it?"

"Did you do anything towards tracing Oscar, when you were in London to-day?"

"I went to a lawyer, and made what arrangements with him I could."

"Here is my pocket-book. Write me down his name and address."

I wrote them. He extinguished the lamp, and led me into the passage. The servant was standing there bewildered. "Good night, James. I am going to bring your master back to Browndown." With that explanation, he took up his hat and stick, and gave me his arm. The moment after, we were out in the dark valley, on our way to the village.

On the walk back to the rectory, he talked with a feverish volubility and excitement. Avoiding the slightest reference to the subject discussed at our strange and stormy interview, he returned, with tenfold confidence in himself, to his old boastful assertion of the great things he was going to do as a painter. The mission which called him to reconcile Hu-

manity with Nature ; the superb scale on which he proposed to interpret sympathetic scenery for the benefit of suffering mankind ; the prime necessity of understanding him, not as a mere painter, but as Grand Consoler in Art—I had it all over again, by way of satisfying my mind as to his prospects and occupations in his future life. It was only when we stopped at the rectory-gate that he referred to what had passed between us—and even then, he only touched on the subject in the briefest possible way.

“ Well ?” he said. “ Have I won back your old regard for me ? Do you believe there is a fine side to be found in the nature of Nugent Dubourg ? Man is a compound animal. You are a woman in ten thousand. Give me a kiss.”

He kissed me, foreign fashion, on both cheeks.

“ Now for Oscar !” he shouted cheerfully. He waved his hat, and disappeared in the darkness. I stood at the gate till the last rapid pit-pat of his feet died away in the silence of the night.

An indescribable depression seized on my spirits. I began to doubt him again, the instant I was alone.

“Is there a time coming,” I asked myself, “when all that I have done to-night must be done over again?”

I opened the rectory-gate. Mr. Finch intercepted me before I could get round to our side of the house. He held up before me, in solemn triumph, a manuscript of many pages.

“My Letter,” he said. “A Letter of Christian remonstrance, to Nugent Dubourg.”

“Nugent Dubourg has left Dimchurch.”

With that reply, I told the rector in as few words as possible how my visit to Browndown had ended.

Mr. Finch looked at his letter. All those pages of eloquence written for nothing? No! In the nature of things, *that* could not possibly be. “You have done very well, Madame Pratolungo,” he remarked, in his most patronising manner. “Very well indeed, all things considered. *But*, I don’t think I shall act

wisely if I destroy this." He carefully locked up his manuscript, and turned to me again with a mysterious smile. "I venture to think," said Mr. Finch with mock humility, "My Letter will be wanted. Don't let me discourage you about Nugent Dubourg. Only let me say:—Is he to be trusted?"

It was said by a fool it would never have been said at all, if he had not written his wonderful letter. Still, it echoed, with a painful fidelity, the misgiving secretly present at that moment in my own mind—and, more yet, it echoed the misgiving in Nugent's mind, the doubt of himself which his own lips had confessed to me in so many words. I wished the rector good night, and went upstairs.

Lucilla was in bed and asleep, when I softly opened her door.

After looking for awhile at her lovely peaceful face, I was obliged to turn away. It was time I left the bedside, when the sight of her only made my spirits sink lower and lower. As I cast my last look at her before

I closed the door, Mr. Finch's ominous question forced itself on me again. In spite of myself, I said to myself—

“Is he to be trusted?”

THE END OF THE SECOND VOLUME.

POOR MISS FINCH

BY THE AUTHOR OF
"THE WOMAN IN WHITE"

